THE SON OF WALLINGFORD

MR. AND MRS. GEORGE RANDOLPH CHESTER

THE SON OF WALLINGFORD

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To our friend, Albert E. Smith, to whose insistence we owe the pleasant task of writing the story of the "SON OF WALLINGFORD", we cordially dedicate this book.

THE AUTHORS

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CHAPTER I

YOUNG JIMMY WALLINGFORD'S EAR

As between the winner and the loser in any commercial transaction, there is a wide difference in the definition of the word "crook"; but in popular opinion he is a man gifted with a fatal fascination for other people's money, a man who springs snarling and sneering from his couch in the early dawn, rushes immediately out into the highways and byways of life, and, by a sort of magic wand process, robs all the honest and virtuous of their hard-gotten wealth; until, in the wee small strokes of night, sleep overtakes him at his nefarious practices, thus giving upright folk a couple of hours in which to toil unmolested.

Such may, indeed, be the case; but there are, doubtless, exceptions; as, for instance, there may be crooks who have their breakfasts before they start "crooking," some perhaps enjoying a bit of melon first, or some preferring orange-juice, or some even prunes! There may be crooks who are fond of their families and their families of them, and who, in many respects, might seem human and ordinary, even as you and I.

No one, for example, would imagine that the large, jovial, genial-looking gentleman now bowling along the pleasantly shaded suburban highway could be any other than an honorably retired man of honorably gotten means.

He drives happily his comfortable car, with his black-mustached companion at his side, and, if one may judge by his round pink countenance, his small but bright and sparkling eye, and his general appearance of well-fed and well-groomed content, there is nothing on his conscience, if he has one. Yet, every dollar belonging to this J. Rufus Wallingford, for such is his name, was once a dollar which was the property of somebody else! Alas, those of us who would remain pure dare not inquire too closely into the history of any dollar. Passed well into the age when he should be as respectable as he looks is this honey-bee of commerce and his life path is strewn with the wreckage of those who were encouraged to take his money from him, but were beaten to it.

As for this black-mustached other, the same. Every thing he has was gathered from those who did not wish to let him have it. The joy of this is in the glitter of his beady black eye, in the audacious pointing of his straight black mustaches, and in the gay alertness of his long, lean figure. Once this Horace G. Daw was but an humble shell-worker at the county fairs, while his fat friend and partner just started poor, as must all boys who would become illustrious and great. Now, prosperity sits on them both like a benediction, and even repute hails them as they near their own homes in beautiful Tarryville.

Here, from beneath the wide-spreading trees of a spacious lawn, is a salute from a thoroughly scrupulous food-staple dealer, who made his fortune by honestly cornering all of a certain food-staple in the market and bankrupting five of his competitors, thereafter forming a neat little trust in flourishing defiance of the Sherman act. Here is a worthy essential-product manufacturer who

amassed his competence during the great war by securing an army contract, and every one knows that all war contracts were honest; yet this same benevolent looking white-whiskered gentleman gives the high sign of good-fellowship to these business buccaneers, and inquires after the health of their families, and, with a twinkle in his keen gray eye, offers illegally to trade a case of illegal Scotch whiskey for a case of illegal rum; tut, tut! Here, just turning in at the gates of his Italian villa, is one of those shining examples of probity, who, starting in life barefooted and never having worked a lick nor engaged in any business, has waxed wealthy through merely having a genius for guiding, and restraining, the political destinies of other people; and even to him Get-Rich-Quick Wallingford and Blackie Daw are well-respected neighbors! Here is an eminent judge, a spare, austere looking judge, strange to say, with his hands behind him as he strolls, amid the sun-spotted shadows of his vine-clad pergola, and he would under no circumstances give any recognition to a crook; yet he beams with pleasure as he sees Messrs. Wallingford and Daw roll by, for he knows these prominent and substantial men of the community as persons totally innocent of all wrong doing, so proved before him in the case of Seligheim and McCarthy versus Wallingford and Daw; and, in the judge's rigid code of ethics, a crook is a man who is convicted of it and sent to jail; otherwise not. Verily neighbors Wallingford and Daw have been granted clean slates here; silken-clad matrons give them dignified acknowledgment, and dancing-eyed young ladies smile at them, and innocent children at play hail them with delight, as they do all men who have kindly hearts and pleasant faces. Small wonder then that neighbors Wallingford

and Daw, as they turn in at the former's stately gates, and drive up a magnificent avenue of trees to the former's magnificent mansion, which is next estate to the latter's magnificent mansion, should glow with the perfect peace of them who have good health and happy circumstances, and nothing with which to reproach themselves.

On the broad piazza of the magnificent mansion wait the wives of the crooks. What sort of woman would the imagination picture a crook's wife to be? Naturally a hard-faced creature with a glittering eye and an air of reckless bravado — or else a furtive, rabbit-like creature with fear in every line of countenance and figure, and constantly dripping tepid tears. Such, indeed, may be the case, but there are exceptions; for instance, the wives of these.

In the porch swing, amid enough cushions to pad comfortably her every luxurious curve, is Violet Bonnie Daw, with much lavender in the richness of her lace, lavender lace stockings on her plump legs, lavender bloom on her buxom cheeks — and in her hand a lavender box, from which ever and anon she selects a chocolate. And what, may we ask, is on the mind of this comely blonde person as with much relish she devours her chocolates? Why, chocolates. These, and nothing more! Near by is Fannie Wallingford. Close friends are these two ladies, yet no two friends could differ more; for Fannie is as dainty as Violet is flaunting, as modest as Violet is aggressive, as dignified as Violet is unconventional, as sweet as Violet is piquant. She is the lily to Violet's rose, as she sits in her frock of creamy film, rocking placidly while she embroiders.

"Hello wife!"

"Hello husband!"

This is the greeting of the Daws, as J. Rufus stops the blue runabout in the porte-cochere, and the two men jump out on the piazza; then Violet Bonnie grabs her Blackie by both ears and shakes his head and gives him a hearty smack, for Violet's ardent affections always take the form of violence. Meanwhile the big crook, a husky brute, takes his wife in his arms and kisses her with marvelous gentleness.

"There's a surprise for you in the garage, Jim," begins Fannie, smiling up at him as she watches for that boyish eagerness to spring into his face; but she gets no further.

"The new car! Come on, Blackie, and play the part of envious piker!" J. Rufus is twenty years younger as he jumps off the piazza, and twenty years older as he lands on his gouty left foot, and stops to wince.

"Get a crutch and come on yourself, you poor old whimp," grins the heartless Blackie, and a shriek and a giggle from the piazza attest the fact that there is more friendly heartlessness in this abode of peace.

But covetous admiration is already in the garage. Over the imported new car, a keenly built, long-nosed, yellow racing roadster, bend two boys, young men rather, one of whom, a sturdily built fellow, has his head inside the hood with the enthusiasm of a terrier at a live rat hole. The taller one, the one leaning over the hood and smiling fondly at the mechanical miracle, is Jimmy Wallingford, the son of the crook! What sort of a son should a crook have? Well, it is to be remembered that a son must have a mother as well as a father, and when Fannie Wallingford is taken into the calculation, with her honesty and goodness, you have an offspring for Get-Rich-Quick Wallingford who is well worth studying. He is a likeable chap,

handsome, athletically built and with the easy self-possession of those who look well-dressed in any sort of clothes. His brown eyes are gentle in expression, but when he narrows them there is revealed an intelligence keen, thoughtful, shrewd. He is smooth skinned, with a face which is oval like his mother's, but somehow, too, suggests the round pinkness of his father's. Clean-cut, perfect features has Jimmy Wallingford, with one exception; his ears, otherwise in good proportion, are lobeless, the rims running down the cheeks and disappearing into them at a tangent! The ordinary observer would pay only passing attention to that ear. if any, and would scarcely consider it a blemish; but to J. Rufus Wallingford it is the problem of life! Sometime a doctor, who had been on the losing side of a commercial transaction with Mr. Wallingford, had told J. Rufus that this lobeless ear, on the then infant Jimmy, was one of the "stigmata of degeneracy," and from that day to this the trifling abnormality has been to the father not only a reproach, as being a bequeathed symbol of what evil might lie in himself, but an eternal signpost warning him to look for some development of character which even a crook might mourn, in his capacity of parent. So far as Jimmy himself is concerned, the lobeless ear has no present significance, for he has not yet had occasion to analyze anything either outside of himself or within. Provided with plenty of money, good health and a happy home, James Wallingford, Jr., has passed through his college years care free, interested so much in everything that he has confined his energies to nothing, except the sheer joy of life. Just now, as his attention turns to the deeply padded crimson leather upholstery of the car, his eyes soften with appreciation;

for the love of luxury, and the need of it, are in him from the very veins of his father. If a young man with this craving, and Jimmy's shrewd intellect and his repressed virility and his gift of attracting people, were to bend his energies in the wrong direction, his power for evil in the world would be incalculable. A young man well worth studying — as a biologist waits what sort of bird he may hatch from a microcosmic egg!

Suddenly the young man whose head has been in the hood raises a square face full of astounding energy, of astounding sincerity, and of an astounding number of freckles. This is E. W. Jessup, otherwise known as "Toad," for obvious reasons, and the adopted son of J. Rufus Wallingford and Blackie Daw, share and share alike; and Toad's enthusiasm for the new car is not only effervescent, it is explosive.

"Say! They ought to wear this engine on the outside! Jimmy, she purrs like a humming bird!"

"I know a better decoration for the outside," grins Jimmy, as he studies the available space in tonneau and on fenders; "the seven lollypops."

"Gee!" A college education has not taken from Toad Jessup the idiom of the soil out of which he had sprung in all the flourishing lustiness of a weed. "Say, you don't suppose Daddy Jim would let us buzz the lollypops up to Tamford in this chariot, do you? We'd have it back by midnight!"

For just an instant Jimmy contemplates that idea as a startling possibility, then his eyes narrow with inherent wisdom, and he smiles his quiet little smile.

"Cast it out of your heart, Toad. I happen to know father. This car is Christmas morning to him!"

"Oh sweet patootie!" The impetuous voice of Blackie Daw, who is in and all over the car before they can quite locate him. "Oh sweet potato pattie!"

Down the path and into the garage waddles the proud possessor of Sweet Patootie, his round pink face beaming with anticipated bliss; and Jimmy meets him at the door with a hearty:

"She's some queen, Dad. I'll say I love her."

"You have nothing on your sportive ancestor, boy!" laughs J. Rufus, and as brown eye meets blue eye for a passing instant of smiling approbation, it is clear that there is a close bond of sympathy between father and son. "Twenty-five thousand round ones it took to roll this baby in!" and hurrying to where B. Daw sits honking wildly in the driver's seat, J. Rufus takes a good long gloat. For him, too, the thrill of that softly humming engine, for him, too, the delight in that long, greyhound line, the appreciation of those luxuriously padded cushions; for he loves his ease, does J. Rufus Wallingford; oh, he loves his ease! "Papa'll take you out for an airing, baby, as soon as he gets a drink," he tells Sweet Patootie, "and a certain dough-faced motor cycle cop on the upstate road is going to have the tail-end ride of his life!" Glowing with the pink pride of possession, he lifts his head, and it gives him added pleasure to note the envy in two pairs of young eyes; friendly envy of course, and unselfish envy — but envy. He grins. Monarch of all he surveys, he casts his eye around the dim garage, where three other cars stand abashed under his contemptuous gaze. "You kids may make yourself a present of any old tub in the place, and when I pass you in this, you may look up and say: 'What was that?'"

Toad is opening his mouth to reply in like banter when he happens to catch the eye of young James Wallingford, and stops bereft of speech. There is a peculiar smile on young Jimmy's lips, a musing smile, which begins with a slight wreathing at the corners, spreads a little, then straightens abruptly, while the shrewd eyes are suddenly veiled beneath his long lashes as his father glances in his direction.

"Thanks," says Jimmy heartily, and Blackie Daw, clambering out of the car, suddenly pauses to give him a hawk-like "once-over," and, with a wink at the puzzled Toad, twirls at his pointed black mustaches and observes:

"Baby runs on gasoline, but its Uncle Horace needs something stronger. Come on, Jim."

Scarcely have the men left the garage when Toad turns to Jimmy with a shrilly whispered:

"What's it? What's the big idea?"

"Baby," grins Wallingford, Jr., unveiling now the sparkle of diabolic intention which had hidden beneath his long lashes. "Oh sweet Sweet Patootie!" and as his broad shoulders heave in a chuckle, he is very like his father; very like.

With no further explanations he takes Toad by the arm, and that young man, who seldom questions Jimmy except on what to do next, and who seldom includes a "why" in any of his questions, goes with him. They slip quietly to the house and wait until they hear the friendly quartette congregate in the library, the room furthest removed from the porte-cochere, and they peer through the windows of that comfortable apartment devoted to literature, where they witness a sight soon to be hidden from mortal eyes.

There is a bowl of cracked ice on the library table, some glasses, some bottles; and the master of a soon-to-be lost art, with his broad back beneath the imposing statue of Pallas Minerva, Goddess of Wisdom, is preparing to compound a cocktail with the care of a chemist and the skill of an artist, while the others whet a thirst by simply watching him. All clear; no danger of an interruption now, so the boys push the plenty-good-enough blue runabout off on the grass and down across the noiseless turf to the garage, where Toad pauses to stifle a roar, for he has seen the dawn of a beautiful light. Then, with equal caution, they push Sweet Patootie up under the porte-cochere, and stroll into the house, casually and nonchalantly, where Jimmy sits on the arm of his mother's chair, slipping his arm around her shoulders for a moment and laying his cheek against hers, while Violet Bonnie grabs Toad, pulls him on the arm of her chair, gives him a bear-like hug and a shove which sends him sprawling; for she is very fond of Toad. In the first lull, Jimmy observes quietly, as if by passing thought:

"By the way, Dad, you meant it when you gave Toad and me a car, didn't you?"

He has chosen his moment carefully. The master of the disappearing art is dripping, drop by drop, some deep-tinted liquid into the bottoms of four crystal glasses, so, without turning his head or removing his gaze from the dripping process, he answers:

"Yep."

"Thanks, Dad," says the son of Wallingford, very quietly, and aware that the hawk-like eye of Blackie is fixed on him, steadily. "May we have the one out in the porte-cochere?"

"Three, four, five," counts J. Rufus, his eye on every drop. "Yep."

"Thanks, Daddy Jim!" explodes Toad. "Hit 'er up, Jimmy!" And as the boys dash out through the hall, snickering, Blackie lets loose loud laughter.

"Stung, you big fish! It's a wonder that boy of yours isn't a dummy, with such a boob for a father!"

For just an instant Wallingford looks at his partner stupidly, then, a deep red replacing the pink in his round countenance, he slams down glass and bottle and starts for the door. Too late! Just as he reaches the piazza, followed by the happy family, there is the whirr of a motor, the slip of a brake, the click of a clutch, the crunch of gravel, and Sweet Patootie is headed out the drive; and Sweet Patootie's purchaser raises his voice in mad protest:

"Here, where are you young devils going with my new car?"

"Our car!" corrects Jimmy at the wheel, pink with joy. "And we're going after a load of peaches. Now say '*what was that!*'"

Thereupon he steps on the energy and Sweet Patootie leaps out into the wide, wide world!

Blackie and Fannie and Violet are in huge enjoyment of the trick, but the face which J. Rufus turns on them is sober and serious. Saying nothing, he stalks into the house and thoughtfully resumes his unfinished occupation; but the pleasure of creation is gone. He tilts the deep-tinted liquid by guess into the remaining glasses, fills them up, tosses on the garnishings, then passes around the mixture, without pride.

"What's the grouch?" demands Blackie. "Be a proper

sport and grin. You can get another car like that without borrowing a cent from Fannie."

"I don't mind the loss of the car, though that's a lie, too," somberly considers J. Rufus, twirling his untasted drink in his hand, "but I don't like the morals of Jimmy's trick — and of course it was *Jimmy's* trick."

"Great heavens, Jim Wallingford, when did you discover morals!" blazes Violet Bonnie. "What have you got to judge morals with? And yet you have the nerve to criticize a fine, pure kid like Jimmy!"

"Really, Jim;" the gentle voice of Fannie, and there is worry on her brow as she studies her husband's frowning countenance, "I don't see why you should distress yourself. It was only a boyish prank, a good joke."

"A twenty-five thousand dollar joke don't get me a laugh any place. It didn't take Jimmy more than two minutes to figure on switching those cars and trapping me into a gift which, on general principles, is so near like a swindle that I'm afraid for his future."

"You're sane in everything except your brains, Jim," is the verdict of Blackie. "The only thing I can find against Jimmy's character is you." This is a pleasantry, but the wince it gives J. Rufus is so far from humorous that Blackie hastens to add: "At that, Jim, you're not so worse. You see, the world is full of simps who are trying to get something for nothing, and your specialty is in slipping them nothing for something. And I'll tell the world for you, Jim, that your graft is as legitimate as any form of the now universally popular profiteering. So buck up, old pal, and face the worst."

"Oh, take away the bull," growls J. Rufus, rousing impatiently from his despondent lethargy. "I'm an

honest grafter, am I? Well — there aren't any!" He speaks with a quite apparent effort, and, his elbows on the arms of his chair, he clasps his hands together and interlaces his plump fingers. A most unusual gesture for him in that it tells of the repression of a deep emotion. His knuckles are white with the pressure his grip puts on them. "I may as well admit," he finally blurts, "that the only thing I'm afraid of in Jimmy is the fact that the boy is my son!"

The confession is wrung out of him, through the agony of fear in the heart of this crook that his son might grow up to be like himself! Fannie Wallingford turns startled eyes to her husband, and her face is pale, and she half puts out her hand as if to touch and comfort him; but Fannie Wallingford is gifted with a wisdom which lets her see the value of a great many things not to do. Blackie and Violet are serious, too, and uncomfortable under it, and it is Vi who breaks the silence, hotly.

"It's Jimmy's ear again! You're nuts on the subject!" She jerks up the well-thumbed book on J. Rufus' pet end of the table. It is Lombroso's "Abnormal Man," and it opens naturally to the part about the lobeless ear. The back of the book is broken at this point, and these pages are grimed with much study. She doesn't look at the thing; she hasn't picked it up for that purpose, but to throw it down for emphasis, which she does emphatically. "I don't believe a word of it! I suppose because a man has squint eyes he likes pickles, or if he has a mole on his neck he grows up to be a wife-beater! Look at your ears, Jim! Perfect! And yet you admit you're an old reprobate!" She powders her nose automatically. It always turns red under excitement. "Of course I'll admit that you can't

grow peaches on a lemon tree, but you can get something else that's good! Look at grapefruit; it's cultivated! Everything's in the cultivation! And I'm here to tell you that there's nothing finer than the cultivation Jimmy Wallingford has had!" And being near enough to Fannie for the purpose, she gives that quiet figure a warm-hearted and impulsive hug, and powders her nose again. "Why, a boy couldn't go wrong with his training!"

"Oh yes he could," responds J. Rufus, now calm. "They're doing it every day. It's a matter of percentages in each case. If there's more bad than there is good in Jimmy, all the training in the world won't save him when the big test comes; and the big test will come, of course, when he's away from the influence which has protected him from having the big test. My love for the boy doesn't blind me to the fact that he has done tricky little things like this automobile turn ever since he was a baby. He's too shrewd, and shrewdness is a knife so sharp and shining that a fellow just has to use it; to cut with!"

A gloomy philosophy this, and a despondent one, from the depression of which none of them can escape, much less Fannie Wallingford, for down in her heart there are darkly secret corners which she would not open even to her own gaze, and Jim has rudely swung wide the doors. She remembers in this moment how she had first learned, while she was making the baby clothes for the coming Jimmy, that her husband's business operations were tricky, and how she had consoled herself that her love, aided by the clutch of soft baby fingers, could remodel him — but she had failed! Trickiness was in him, was a part of him, was inseparable from him; and all her love, all her loyalty, all her honest influence had not altered him one whit. The

joy of wielding the shining blade had been too strong for him to overcome, the tang and the zest of matching wits against stupidity too keen a pleasure. And it was true about Jimmy. He is like his father, so like him!

CHAPTER II

YOUNG DOC BLINKER'S NOSE

"SHIMMIE" Devere was a roly-poly little girl with dimples, and eyes which had a roguish upward roll, and there was nothing on her mind but her beautiful brown curls; a shrug of the left shoulder, a jerk of the right, a cute little shiver from the waist up, and a giggle — that was Shimmie. Miss Cleo Patra was a dangerous young vamp, as you could tell by her crimson gown and her crimson lips, her interesting pallor, her long, slanting, oval, black lashes and brows, and her blue-veined eyelids; and she didn't care for men; they were her prey! Floradora Sexton was a stately miss, dignified and languid, with large round eyes as stupid as she could make them; passing through on her beauty alone, was Floradora, and if she had anything else she'd consider it a detriment. Maria Theresa Plomps, she of the eyes which seemed eternally half-closed in merriment, was frankly fat, with the creamy complexion and the full curved lips of the fat when they are pretty; a lusty coon shouter and a vigorous hoe-down artiste, Maria Theresa, who should have been placid but was always perturbed. The McCabe twins, Dottie and Lottie, were dainty and demure, and they had a wonderful trick; they always wore complementary colors; if Dottie wore mauve, Lottie wore cerise; pretty girls both, but together they had four times as much admiration as either would singly — inseparable, the McCabe twins. These were six, and as they stood in dingy Pie Alley at the stage

entrance of a just-off-Broadway theatre, they were watching "Lanks" Anderson with half envious amusement. "Lanks," named Evelyn till she grew up and grew up and grew up, was practicing the difficult side slip in her lean-legged, lean-armed, lean-bodied dance, which she called "The Rubber Tree." The leader of the seven, was Lanks, and the seven were the "lollypops," members of the "On With the Jazz" Company, now ready to seek fame and fortune in the high-brush circuit; and they were all unspoiled by Fortune's favors, because so far Fortune hadn't given them any favors, except youth and good looks and such abilities as beginners might have.

Into the wait came the perturbed voice of Maria Theresa Plomps, who, palpitating with a sudden panic-stricken thought, placed her hand eight inches from her heart, which was as near as she could get.

"My heavens, suppose they shouldn't come!"

Lanks Anderson, never stopping the industrious growth of her "Rubber Tree" dance, glowered down at Maria Theresa:

"Somebody stop her! She's off again, and the world is dead."

"Well, but listen!" insisted Maria Theresa; "if they don't come, we're stuck!"

"Oh let mother wash the dishes, I'm polishing my nails," sang Shimmie, and finished with a giggle and gave her little shiver. She should wither and pine o'er carking care, should Shimmie.

"But the last train that would get us to Tamford in time is gone!" persisted Plomps, now reaching the moist stage of apprehension, and daubing the beads of sudden perspiration from her smooth brow. "And there isn't

enough money in this crowd to hire a car and if the show opens without us —"

"It can't," considered Dottie McCabe, in coral today; Lottie was in apricot. Sensible girls, the twins, and Lottie added: "There *is* a way you can get up to Tamford, by a chain of trolleys."

"Oh, hear our canary warble," retorted Lanks. "A friend of mine started up to Tamford by trolley once, to enlist with his home regiment, and now they're trying to get word to him, en route, that the war's over. I pin my faith to Snookums and Spots, who never yet deceived!"

"Don't use a safety clutch on your pin, dearie," drawled Cleo, the dangerous young vamp; "you might want to unpin it quick. Snookums and Spots are but males, remember."

"Anyhow I wish they'd come!" mourned Maria Theresa, looking to Florodora for sympathy, for Plomps worshipped the divine Florodora, most beautiful of her sex; but Florodora only smiled vaguely. She never worried about anything; she was beautiful, that was enough.

A wild honking at the entrance to Pie Alley; then, in among the trucks and push carts which cluttered that sunbaked canyon of fire escapes and dingy red brick, there dashed and weaved a long-nosed, yellow racing roadster.

"Oh pipe the gold-plated equipage!" shouted Maria Theresa every care swept away and her eyes half shut, with twinkling merriment.

There was a concerted rush for the "gold-plated equipage" as it was twisted deftly in at the curb by "Snookums," alias Jimmy Wallingford, and simultaneously the doors were thrown open by "Spots," otherwise

Toad Jessup, every freckle of whose square countenance was incandescent with pride.

"Just room enough for four, but it'll carry nine," explained Jimmy urbanely, his pride taking the form of such cat-like gratification that he almost seemed to purr.

"Who is missing a car of this description?" inquired Lanks perfunctorily, and her question brought a shout of glee from both the boys; which glee was shared by the seven lollypops when, with shriek upon shriek and peal upon peal, they heard the tale of Sweet Patootie; but this was as they were speeding up Fifth Avenue, brightening that busy thoroughfare with a bouquet as gay and as fragrant as could be plucked in any garden. They were plastered all over Sweet Patootie, sticking out so much in various directions that it was necessary to count both heads and legs to figure that they were nine. Many an amused and admiring glance was cast on them and many an old heart beat young again, for here were youth and gaiety and thoughtless companionship, and freedom from cares which would come plenty soon enough.

It wasn't necessary to go through Tarryville, and pass the magnificent Wallingford estate, but somehow they were impelled so to do, and, as they whizzed beneath the tall old trees of the spaciously shaded highway, they gave the quartette on the pillared piazza the grand honk and whoop of good fellowship; also triumph!

"What was that?" snorted Blackie, and Fannie laughed with Vi, but there was only a momentary grin from the glum J. Rufus, even when Violet Bonnie added:

"Chorus girls! Thank God our boys are safe!"

Safe enough they were, for their thoughts were too busy for guile. Only one thing was on the minds of the occu-

pants of the gold-plated equipage as they spun on; the car wasn't utilizing its full capacity! There was a vacant hang-on atop the spare tires, and there was an empty fender! To prevent this ghastly waste, Sweet Patootie was stopped with a thud and three honks in front of the Whickham Medical Academy, which was an absolutely reliable place for the purpose, as proved by the fact that immediately a quite available supply of freshmen dropped a football and came rushing down to the curb in flying wedge formation, each and every one of them ready, at a moment's notice, to sing a song, dance, mix a drink, drink it, run a foot race, play poker, fight, or fall in love.

"Room for two fellows!" called Jimmy Wallingford. "Who comes?"

In the next instant the car was buried by the muscular avalanche, and out of the struggling football pile-up there piped a thin, high-pitched, childish treble:

"Oh! Oh! Please boys! My hat!" It was Florodora Sexton, and a most amazingly infantile voice to come from so stately a creature.

Thereupon, out of the melee there emerged two snake-like arms, splitting a thin passage, then one long, lean leg protruded over the side of the car, another long lean leg followed, and Lanks Anderson slid down to the sidewalk. "Shoot for it, ruffians," she ordered. "Here are the bones," and with a little twist of her wrist she rolled a pair of dice on the pavement.

Ring formation instantaneously, with all the embryo doctors on their knees around the two little cubical arbiters of fortune, and all of the girls piled out of the car to watch the momentous contest, except Florodora, who sat fixing her hat in self-centered content.

Yowee! Amid the groans of the losers, a sawed-off little runt who was as agile as a flea, jumped up out of the ring and sprinted across the campus in his track athletics to get his clothes, shrilling his joy as he ran. Yippee! The other victor, a red-headed scholar with a permanent grin which spread dangerously near his ears, and with loose-jointed legs which were born since the dancing craze could become hereditary, jumped into the circle, scooped up the dice, and, as an expression of his thankfulness, began to "pat juba" in such perfection of rhythm that the bubbling Shimmie Devere could not resist the challenge. Prancing opposite "Reddy" Plickens with a shrug of her left shoulder, a jerk of the right, a shiver, a giggle and that devilish uproll of the eye, she let down a patter of twinkling feet which, when Shimmie should learn to put that dance on the stage with the same abandon and fervor, would make her reputation for life. Whoop! The party was on! Two score hands joined in the patting, and the fat student, who had tried harder than any one to win and "grouched" harder when he lost, whipped out a harmonica, and added just enough music to blend the mad syncopation. Reddy Plickens was right there with the wriggle; a shrug of the left shoulder, a jerk of the right, a shiver of the torso, a falsetto imitation of Shimmie's giggle, and an absurd mimicry of her devilish uprolled eye, which filled that sedate old campus with such peals of laughter as it had not heard for many a day.

Out of the college came sedately the Professor of Biology and the white-whiskered Dean, and no sooner had they come in sight of the activity, with its dottings and bobbings of gay color, than, with unspoken accord, they turned their backs to it and paced the other way.

"Have you ever noticed," said the Professor of Biology, gravely and scientifically, "that the chemical attraction between the opposite sexes never seems more nascent and effervescent than between college youths and young ladies of the stage?"

"I have not," returned the Dean gravely, but with a twinkle of his eye. "I am near-sighted, after class time;" and a close observer, one who had sympathy for syncopation, might have noticed that the business-like Professor of Biology and the white-whiskered Dean had adjusted their pace to that enticing jazz, and were stepping lightly.

Not so the two seniors who now came out of the college, and viewed the disgraceful pagan orgy from afar. Within a week these two spare-bodied and spare-minded young gentlemen would have their degrees, could write M.D. after their names and print "Doctor" on their doors, and the dignity of that awe-inspiring potentiality governed their every breath. One was cultivating professional burnsides, as being the first whiskers he could acquire, and he was called "Blinkers" thereby. It was he who felt that, in the absence of the faculty, they should do something about this, and started down there to do it. The other, a young man whose face was composed exclusively of knobs and who wore goggles, had not stamped his individuality enough on the place to be called by a name, but he was a person with much interest in other people; knew all about them; anything he could find out. Said he:

"Do you see that tall young man with the two girls hanging on him in such brazen intimacy? Jimmy Wallingford!" And while they walked down across the campus to give Doc Blinkers' Obvious Duty its exercise, the

goggled young man delivered a highly embellished thesis on the notorious father and the spendthrift son.

Meanwhile Jimmy Wallingford looked on the pagan orgy in smiling enjoyment of it all. A curious person, Jimmy Wallingford; so often in, but not frequently of, the hilarity which he occasioned and led; largely a spectator at his own revels, and a studious spectator, with always some vague purpose beneath, a thoughtfulness which he did not himself understand. Something queerly impersonal, too, in his treatment of these girls. When the McCabe twins presently undraped themselves from him, and with faint stirrings of professional jealousy edged into the widening circle around the performers, it made no difference to him, apparently, that Lanks Anderson took their place, and, wrapping both snaky arms around his neck from behind, leaned against "Jimmy dear" to watch the proceedings. He was as disinterested as if he had been a hitching post, though he patted the elbow which clutched around his neck.

"We're off!" shouted a jubilant voice, and past the mob there flew a sawed-off figure which gave a flying leap astride the spare tires, and loudly demanded that they go some place! A hasty glance at watches broke up the specialty of the McCabe twins, their whirlwind dance of fluff and flying legs, and the mob surged to the car, where those embryo physicians and surgeons who had the good fortune to know Jimmy and Toad found time at last to notice the gold-plated equipage, and to inquire into its antecedents. Nine voices told the exultant tale of Sweet Patootie, to which the goggled young senior and Blinkers, now at the rear of the throng, listened, shocked in every one of the finer sensibilities which infest humanity. The

party was in and on the car before the applause had subsided enough for Blinkers to exercise his Obvious Duty.

"Wait a minute!" he called in his sternest tones, and stepped in front of the car.

"You're too late, Blinkers; all full," returned Reddy Plickens easily, bending his back over the circumference of the fender as one preparing for peaceful slumber.

Ignoring that loathsome suggestion, Blinkers stiffened his neck, already stiff enough by virtue of his virtues. He was a heavy-boned young man, who might have been good looking in spite of his sharp nose, had it not been for the lines around his eyes; austerity or avarice, or both.

"I want you freshmen to understand," said he, "that if there is a repetition of today's desecration of our campus, I shall report the matter fully to the faculty, *with* all names!"

"Well, now that's finished," shrilled the runt from the saddle on the spare tires, "drive on!" and all agreed, vociferously.

"It is *not* finished!" insisted Blinkers, aggravated into more of his Obvious Duty. "I have now made up my mind to report this affair also in full, and I fancy that the faculty will take into account the questionable character of the persons who —"

"That will be about all!" interrupted a quiet but very firm voice. It was Jimmy Wallingford, whose eternal principle, gathered from association with his mother and Violet Bonnie, was that a lady is anybody who wears a dress. "Whatever else you were about to say, I'd advise you not to say it."

Doc Blinkers turned to resent the reproof, and suddenly his nose hooked down and the crow's feet around his eyes

deepened as he caught sight of a genuine stigmatum of degeneracy.

"I've only this to say to you, young Get-Rich-Quick Wallingford;" he observed, with the pompous assurance of a medical man, who may say anything; "from the way in which you secured this car, I should advise you to watch out for that lobeless ear!"

Appalled silence. Jimmy took that stupefying blow without a physical wince, but his face went set and pale as he started grimly to rise from the wheel. At that instant, however, a square, hard-angled figure, surmounted by a red face with greenish freckles, came hurdling across the hood of the car. The action was so instantaneous that almost in the same breath Toad Jessup's broad hand gripped Doc Blinkers' shoulder, swung him facing, and pushed him slightly away into exact range. Not a word was said. Instead, a hard fist suddenly shot out, caught Blinkers directly under the chin, and knocked him up over the curb and on the pavement, sprawling; all this amid wild applause, in which "Lanks" Anderson fell out of the car through sheer excess of enthusiasm.

"See here, see here!" protested the goggled senior, but Lanks, whose bodily contortions were of incalculable ease, set her foot against the goggled one's stomach as she rose, straightened her leg, and so violently catapulted the astounded friend of Blinkers that he ran half a block backwards before he was seated.

Meanwhile the pleased spectators made a wide ring around the fallen Blinkers, they not wishing to interfere with the work of an expert, and with tense approval watched Toad pick up the enemy to avoid hitting him when he was down.

"This for yours!" savagely husked Toad, while he jockeyed around the savagely plunging senior for an opening. "Talking of ears and things, suppose you keep your dang nose out of other people's business!" Whereupon he smashed it, and this time left the fellow to pick himself up.

"Our hero!" cried Lanks, and wrapping her snake-like arms a couple of wraps around Snookum's champion, smacked him the meed of a conqueror on the freckled forehead; while Cleo Patra, then and there, made up her mind not to vamp "Spots." He was too nice a boy!

"Oh when do we eat or anything!" shrilled the runt from the rear. "Or have we no gas!"

Automatically Jimmy reached for the brake, and looked to see if all were in their places. His face was still pale, and there was a hurt in his eyes which had never been there before, the hurt of the first deep humiliation he had known as a man. But he smiled back genially at the cheering freshmen as Sweet Patootie moved off — for he had a gift of great value from his father; the control of all his faculties under all circumstances!

It was two o'clock in the morning when the boys came home, and the lights were still blazing in the Wallingford library, evidence of one of those casual inter-family poker games, which might be played for a penny a chip or ten dollars; it didn't matter, since no one cared who got the money. The whirr of the incoming motor apparently broke up the game, for as Jimmy and Toad walked up from the garage the piano was rattling under the well-known touch of Blackie, and that effervescent gentleman's voice was ringing out, clearly and heartily, a parody of his own:

Hush-a-bye baby, I'll tell you a joke,
We bought us an auto, and now we are broke.
Your daddy's quit working, he's got a new stunt,
We've no use for money, we live on our front.

Hush-a-bye,
Don't you cry,
We can't pay our rent,
Because whiskey's so high.

Inspired by this flippant ditty, Toad burst in on the gathering with his usual point-blank high spirits, and proudly announced:

"Say, we made ninety in our new whizzer! We'd have pushed her up past that, but Doc Plickens fell off. Lucky, too, it was in front of a hospital, so we took him right in and had him patched up. Say! Doc wants to quit medicine and double up with Shimmie Devere in a new turn."

"Yes," laughed Jimmy. "Plickens believes that his talent is not from the eyebrows up, but from the hips down."

Everybody laughed but J. Rufus. He cleared his throat, and Jimmy, who had been conscious of his father every moment since he came into the room, now turned and looked at him fully for the first time. It was a clear, steady gaze which would have disconcerted most people, but not a man to whom contests of will and of wits was a profession.

"It seems to me, Jimmy," said he, "that the friends with whom you spend most of your time are not a very helpful outfit."

Painful silence followed that remark. There was a

startled feeling in the room, a depressing sense that they were all intruders on a vital private scene which concerned but two people in the world, both strong.

"Possibly not," admitted Jimmy, then there followed his quiet little smile. "Although I wasn't aware that I needed any help."

"I won't have any tricks of language!" suddenly exploded J. Rufus, placing his fist on the table and pressing it there, a much more significant demonstration than if he had pounded; and his own face went white.

Jimmy's eyes roved to his mother. Her lips were quivering, though she strove to hold them firm, and the slender fingers of her two hands were clasped together in her lap. The hour had come! Jimmy sat easily on the arm of his mother's chair and without looking at her, put his arm around her. From now on, he never removed his clear gaze from his father, and the two men looked steadily at each other. They were very much alike, especially in this one particular, that each, to this moment, had held himself superior to all the world, in regard to his own will concerning his own affairs. From a boy, young Jimmy had quietly planned and executed what he would, usually without arousing antagonism, usually by getting around opposition rather than fighting it down, and suddenly each of them realized that the other knew no law except himself.

Blackie, for the first time in his life, felt panic stricken. His impulse was to make a diversion, to jump into this scene and "break it up," and his fingers had automatically poised over the piano. That impulse resulted in one feeble, half-recalled note, for Blackie realized that this moment of tragic tensity in the lives of these whom he loved could

only be delayed, not avoided; so he lit a cigarette and looked at the floor, while Violet Bonnie Daw powdered her nose like a flurried automaton, not knowing what else to do. Fannie did not move. The silence became intolerable. It was J. Rufus who broke it again.

"I am not satisfied with you, Jimmy," he went on, clearing his throat again and again. There was a huskiness in it which had never come to him in his most critical commercial moments, when failure might attend the slightest wavering of his voice. "I have given you every advantage. I have supplied you with money without stint, and I have frequently tried to encourage your ambition along whatever line you might choose, whether the arts, the sciences, the professions. You do not seem to have shown an interest in anything, except the idle pursuits of a rich man's son — *and* you have today shown a tendency which I have noticed before in you, a trickiness in the achievement of your ends which cannot be excused by any necessity on your part. I must confess that your ethical and moral bents are such as to cause me great uneasiness; since it has been the dream of my life that my son should occupy an honored and respected place in the world."

There was another silence, in which the only audible sound was the rasping of Toad's stiff hair as he brushed it back from his forehead, over and over. When the voice of Jimmy replied, it was quiet, clear, even gentle, and unmarred by any huskiness or waver whatsoever.

"Quite so," he said, rising and standing very straight; and still he had never removed his eyes from his father! "It seems to me, Father, that if you had wanted your son to become an honored and respected citizen, you began

about one generation too late. We'll let that pass, however. Nothing which now exists between us can be altered by argument. But I have made up my mind to find out for myself what is in me. Your study of these books," and he picked up and dropped the one on the corner of the table, "has aroused more curiosity in me, perhaps, than it has in you, so I am going away, in the morning, and see what will happen to me when I am thrown on my own resources, and not —" He paused for an instant, hesitated then came that little straightening of the lips which had in it a slight suggestion of cruelty, "and not as the son of Get-Rich-Quick Wallingford!"

J. Rufus took this blow motionlessly, as his son had taken that other blow. His face had been white; now there seemed a wave of extra pallor to sweep over it and harden it. He might have been a marble statue, with his lack of blood and his lack of change in that set and rigid expression. The thumb of the fist on the table presently unfolded and clasped itself down against the under side of the table edge; then the color began to sweep back into his face, and he rose. Blackie, regarding his old partner with that keenness of intuition which had become absolute knowledge with the passing of the years, relaxed. His knowledge of J. Rufus Wallingford was more perfect even than Fannie's, or perhaps it was that his acceptance of facts was more philosophical than hers, for she rose when J. Rufus did, and was about to step between the two men when Violet Bonnie, herself as keen of intuition as any of these extraordinarily intuitive people, held Fannie by the arm. J. Rufus paused a moment. There was a queer little jerk in his knee, as if it had wanted to let him down again, then he walked over to his son, and held out his hand.

"The best of luck, kid," he said, and that was all. The old familiar smile wreathed again his round countenance, and Jimmy looked into a pair of small bright eyes which twinkled jovially — as nearly as they could. Whatever of stiffness there had been in the boy melted instantly.

"Thanks, Dad." A trace of a gulp in his voice as he held out his hand, and the two Wallingfords, father and son, stood there in a firm handclasp for a moment, still gazing steadily into each other's eyes; and neither man, they were proud afterwards to reflect, had weakened.

"Say Jimmy!" The voice of Toad, with its usual blurt of suddenly found enthusiasm. "We take the new car with us, don't we?"

CHAPTER III

INTRODUCING THE WALL BROTHERS

It having come exactly that time of late afternoon for Mr. Gander to cross the road, he quite naturally proceeded to cross the road. He quacked once, and once only, a short, deep-throated peremptory quack in significance of his lordly intention; and so justifiable was his complacency in the obedience of his harem, that, when he emerged upon the highway, the three Mrs. Ganders were waddling after him in precise file, the favorite first. The blue sky arched above them and the waning summer sun was warm, and at the bottom of the hill spread toylike Fawnlake City, at the edge of its patch of shimmering water, which is always good for a goose to look upon; and the world was right. As the plump and slickly preened-procession neared the center of the road, however, a long nosed, yellow racing roadster loomed above the brow of the hill and set up an imperative honking.

Why should the goose have been so maligned in history and literature, and made to seem a ridiculous figure? There is nothing so majestic as a goose, nothing so dignified, nothing so insistent upon a principle. Mr. Gander had been crossing the road from the Waite's spring run to the Curtis place, at this particular spot and at this particular time of day, ever since he had ceased to be a gosling, and, secure in his scared rights as a pedestrian, he quacked his answer to that honking impertinence and waddled straight on across the road, looking neither to the right

nor to the left, and disdaining to quicken his pace by even one heart beat lest his females think him less ganderly; and such was the beautiful faith of the Mrs. Ganders in the leadership of their lord and master, who had always protected as well as chastened them, that, suppressing any feminine inclinations they might have had for panic or flight, they waddled straight on after him in unbroken procession while the vast destroying monster came bearing swiftly down on them!

More honks, yells, the wild screech of brakes and the smell of burning rubber; and Sweet Patootie stopped with a jerk not two feet from the geese, while Jimmy Wallingford dropped both arms limply and Toad Jessup sank back to exhale all the breath he had been holding in his capacious lungs. Upon this, as the oldest of the Mrs. Ganders serenely swished her tail through the Curtis fence, a silvery laugh rang out near by.

Now Nature, doubtless for reasons of her own, has put into young men intense curiosity concerning a silvery laugh, so both tourists looked! There, where the trumpet vines arched over the gate of Talbot Curtis's beautiful old-fashioned place, the boys beheld a most interesting contest between Mary Curtis and the scenery. Tall old trees, a high-pillared old white house with honeysuckles, green lawn, flowers, shrubbery, a background of rock strewn brown hill, flecks of lazy white fleece in the blue above; that was the scenery — you know, exquisite stuff which an artist might put in a picture. As a rival to all this, was just a slender slip of a girl in a simple white dress and a floppy leghorn hat, yet she won the contest immediately and unanimously. There is no use to describe shining dark hair, delicately tinted oval cheeks, curving red lips,

pointed chin, well arched brows, large soft eyes, slim white neck or well poised head and all such things, for the same might be said of many another girl — only — and here is the vast difference — this was Mary Curtis!

Now Nature, doubtless for reasons of her own, had implanted in Jimmy Wallingford a keen interest in pretty girls, and when he saw this one he promptly forgot all the other pretty ones in the world. Moreover, he so frankly betrayed his stupefied admiration that Mary Curtis stopped laughing and lowered her eyes in confusion. Mark you, she did not turn indignantly back to the house, or look indifferently down the hill, or otherwise indicate that she was mortally offended by this admiration; she merely lowered her eyes in confusion, whereupon Jimmy Wallingford, impelled by some impulse for which also Nature doubtless had a good and sufficient reason of her own, grabbed a spouted water can, leaped lightly from the car and approached the gate, doffing his cap.

"Our car is thirsty," he stated, in his smooth and easy tones. "May we give it a drink?"

The prettiest girl in any town cannot be in entire ignorance of the ways of young men, so Mary Curtis, demure as she was, knew, as well as this audacious young stranger knew, that there was enough water in that radiator to run the car for fifty miles, if need be; yet she did not refuse the water. Instead, she swung open the gate, and said:

"Certainly. You will find the well right back at the side of the house."

He knew it! He had been positive that her speaking voice would be as beautiful, as soft and as sweet as her silvery laugh; and while he was pondering how to hear it again, she suddenly raised her long lashes and let him see

the dancing devils in the depths of her velvet brown eyes; whereupon Snookums was shocked into unbelievable silence. Adroit as he was, and ready as he was, he was suddenly handicapped. He had been used to the sort of girls he had met carelessly in his college days, the sort to whom he could say: "Well, little one, how goes it?" and mean no offense, and none taken; but this wasn't that kind of a girl, and he pondered this so long, for him, that there was nothing to do but go on in and get the water. He went just in time to save Mary from panic, for she was demure, really, and her assurance was by no means equal to her knowledge. As Jimmy curved around the barberry bush, however, some of the faculties he inherited from his brilliant father returned to the aid of his bewildered senses, and he gave Toad the high sign, indicating with one swift jerk of the finger that the attraction must be held at the gate.

No trick at all for Toad. He was *not* a lady's man. They had no effect on him whatsoever, so he stood in no awe of their blandishments. Shimmie Devere, or Lanks, or any of 'em, might hang on him all they liked; he merely shook them off when he was ready to move or change position; consequently he walked straight up to Mary Curtis and observed, politely enough and cap in hand:

"Beg pardon, what town is this?"

Strange, Mary wasn't at all embarrassed or confused as she looked this ingenious young chap frankly in the frank eye. Oh! Lieutenant Freckles acting as orderly for Captain Smooth; and suddenly she laughed.

"This is Fawnlake City, the town the signboards have been telling about for thirty miles."

"Couldn't see 'em," declared Toad, unabashed, and he

put an elbow comfortably on the gate post. "This little old car just refuses to be slowed down for a signboard, so all we can do with her is pick the best looking road and let her whizz till we get some place. Say! Do you want to see the dandiest little engine ever hidden under a hood? Come on, and I'll treat you to a look."

He led the way out so confidently, and his enthusiasm was so contagious, that Mary Curtis, smiling at herself for doing it, found herself looking at the inwards of the imported miracle. What she saw was a number of surfaces with grease on them, and knobs and brass pipes and screws and nuts and things; and it was very edifying!

When "Captain Smooth" returned, "Lieutenant Freckles," who was not a flowery describer though graphic, was most volubly explaining the bore of the cylinders, the stroke of the pistons, the gasoline consumption, and all those things which seem to so mysteriously thrill every ardent motorist. Quietly Jimmy filled the radiator, and as he did so the little smile came on his lips. The attraction had not looked at him, but she was wandering slightly in her attention to Toad's description of the talented carburetor! Her hand lay on the front fender. It was a long, splendidly formed hand with pink nails, tapering and well kept; a beautiful hand. She moved it. She was distinctly conscious that it was being admired, warmly. There was a click. Jimmy was screwing on the cap of the radiator. Why she should have an unconquerable curiosity to see anybody screw on the cap of a radiator she could not have told, but she had. Her entire system seemed to be insanely interested in the mystery of how a radiator cap is screwed on; so much so that her neck muscles acted independently of her will, and they, not she, turned her

head in Jimmy's direction. He was smiling! He was about to speak — to open a conversation! Panic suddenly seized little Mary Curtis, along with the guilt of vast impropriety! Why this audacious young stranger would think she was flirting with him! Help! Help! Salvation came up the hill in the nick of time, and in the semblance of a comfortably built man in a pongee suit, a Panama hat and white canvas shoes, who walked with a slight waddle, carried a palm leaf fan in one hand and a market basket on the other arm.

"Oh, it's Daddy!" exclaimed little Mary, and ran to greet him affectionately.

Jimmy leaned his elbow on the radiator, and looked at Toad. Toad leaned his elbow on the foredoor and looked at Jimmy, and both realized that an event of unusual interest had come into their lives. They had stopped at a gate, and asked a girl for water for the radiator, and Toad had shown her the engine of their car, and she had gone to kiss her Daddy. Of such events are the thrills of life composed! Not a word said Jimmy, and not a word said Toad for as much as a minute, when the solemnity of the occasion was broken by Toad.

"Well," he grinned, "I suppose here's where we locate."

Jimmy grinned, too, then he looked down the long road which became Main Street where the paths turned to sidewalks, and his grin changed to a musing smile. Suddenly he wheeled, and walked straight over to where the attraction clung, for protection, to Daddy's arm.

"I beg your pardon," he said briskly but with his pleasantest address; "Can you tell me the population of this town?"

Mary Curtis gasped. Truly this young man *was* auda-

cious, though interesting thereby. Meanwhile Talbot Curtis put down his market basket, and pulled off his Panama hat as if he couldn't wait any longer to get rid of it, and revealed a face which was as guileless as a baby's, an impression accentuated by the white curls which clustered round his neck. He surveyed the tall, clean-cut young man with approbation, for there was that in the smiling countenance of Jimmy Wallingford, and his genial eye, which begat confidence.

"Well," Tal drawlingly considered, "They claim it to be somewhere around fifty thousand."

"Thank you. What is the principal industry?"

"Sleep," was the instant return, and then Mary's daddy laughed till his curls bobbed.

Toad Jessup was now ranged solidly alongside Jimmy, and where Jimmy had been business-like, Toad was eager.

"The reason we're asking," he broke in, "Is that we're looking for a good town where we can locate and start in business."

"Well, well." Tal Curtis surveyed both boys with a new and a critical interest, as did the startled Mary; but Tal's eyes softened as he said, conscientiously: "I don't believe I could recommend this town to a couple of live, bright young fellows like you are. Lord knows, we need 'em, but it wouldn't be fair."

Something seemed wrong about this situation. Ordinarily two bright, live-looking young men hunting for a business location would have been grateful for such blunt facts, and would have shown it, but these young men seemed amused by the answer.

"It might be," considered Jimmy, his eyes narrowing shrewdly, "that a more or less unprogressive town would

offer better possibilities and less competition than a town where everybody is on tip-toe and fighting for advantage."

"I declare!" and Tal Curtis stared at Jimmy as if that particular line of reasoning had been new, startling and good. "Well, if you young men are really interested, I wouldn't be doing my duty by not setting forth what advantages we may have. Suppose you come in and sit on my portico, and it will be a pleasure to tell you everything I know."

Mary Curtis, glancing sidelong at Jimmy, saw the light of triumph leap within him, and something sparkled in her eye, and something twitched at the corners of her lips. She picked up the market basket and went in the house!

Half an hour later the boys were still on the portico, getting facts about Fawnlake City, the wealth of its surrounding farm activity, its grain elevators, its cattle industry, its factories, its banks, and its commerce in general, as Mary noted when she every now and anon passed back of the fluttering lace curtains of the parlor windows. Mother Curtis and Grandma came out meantime to the corner of the great high portico where it pillared back in stately procession along the side of the house; and Mother Curtis, a stiffly dignified lady indeed, sat in her prim spareness and upheld the pride of the old Curtis family — she was a Bozzleweed before marriage. Grandma, a keen-eyed little old bit of femininity, with her white hair waved just so and a perpetual fichu around her neck, was too active of mind for sitting pride, so she trotted down the path and among the flower beds, and presently her birdlike gaze was attracted to Sweet Patootie, on which the luxury

loving imagination of her son Tal had rested many times in as many minutes.

"And maybe," suggested Tal finally, as a result of all this fond imagining, "maybe I might be able to tell you more about the town if I just show it to you. I reckon there's time before supper."

Fine, oh very fine! The boys rose with alacrity, but while Jimmie resisted, diplomatically, the impulse to peer in through those fluttering curtains of the parlor window, Toad frankly obeyed the impulse. Nothing moved in there, although there was the faint suggestion of a suppressed laugh, like the far-off tinkle of a silver bell. There seemed to be nothing to do but lead the way to the car, so Jimmy did it; and Grandma Curtis, inspecting the gold-plated equipage with a capacity for joy as unfading as her eyes, looked around at them so glowingly that Jimmy came right over to her with that gentle smile which his mother knew so well.

"Won't you come along? It's very comfortable, and we'll promise not to drive fast."

"My, my, I don't mind how fast you drive," laughed Grandma, her foot already on the runningboard.

Immediately Toad was on one side of her and Jimmy on the other, placing her amid the crimson cushions as carefully as if she had been a precious bisque; and no words can express the disapproval on the face of Mother Curtis as she stood at the front gate and watched Grandma, representative of the oldest family in the community, driving away with strangers; while Mary — she stood by her mother — was indignant, with herself that she found so much longing in her! Nor can any words express the delight which beamed from the wax-like countenance of

Grandma as the long-nosed car slipped swiftly and easily down the hill, the breeze whipping at the curls around the nape of Tal Curtis's neck, up there in front with Jimmy.

Fawnlake City consisted primarily of Main Street. That's where they had the boulevard lighting system with the opalescent globes of four different shapes, spherical, acorn, cylindrical and square, four blocks of each, representing the varying artistic tastes of four successive city councils. The leading motion picture houses, the Palatial and the Einstein, were on Main Street, down where the town was active, and lent the glitter of their much belighted fronts to the night life of the place. The Metropolitan Opera House, given over to vaudeville, was also in this district, together with the Emporium, the Fair, and the Big Store; and at the foot of Main Street, where it ended ornately in a little park and a bandstand and the beach of a ten acre lake with a dam and a mill, stood the Hotel Splendide. Rather a pretty town, was Fawnlake City, and prosperous looking, its citizens comfortably clad if not stylishly, and mostly moving with the untroubled ease of Tal Curtis. There were rather pretentious residences along the near side of the lake, though not such dignified old places as those at the upper end of Main Street, beyond the boulevard lighting system, where the staid first families had held aloof, in their tree clad acreage, from the glitter and grime of the encroaching "city." A most attractive place, this, and as they started back up the hill, and the boulevard lights began to glow softly, like great smooth pearls, in the gathering twilight, it seemed a pity to both Jimmy and Toad that they had not already found some brimming opportunity into which they might plunge and fill it to the splashing point;

particularly was this true when they reached again the gate with the over-arching trumpet vines. The tree toads and the crickets were beginning to accentuate with their strident voices the twilight peacefulness, and the bull frogs in some distant marsh were croaking out their bass accompaniment to the evening paean, and the fragrance of the jasmine was in the air, and a slender white figure sat amid the dimness on the great white portico. A beautiful town, Fawnlake City!

"I think we'll stay long enough to investigate," observed Jimmy Wallingford to Tal, as briskly businesslike as possible, while he turned to help Toad lift Grandma tenderly out.

"Good!" exclaimed Tal Curtis heartily. "And if my business experience can help you any, you must feel free to consult me, although I'm not much of a business man."

"Oh, yes, do come out!" added the excited high-pitched voice of Grandma. "We'll be glad to see you any time, Mr. — Mr. — "

Jimmy hesitated, his gaze turning up there towards the dimness, then he said to Grandma:

"Wall is the name, James Wall; and this is my brother Edward!"

The deed was done. The Wall brothers were definitely committed to their new names, not merely on hotel registers as in the past week of touch-it-and-hop prospecting, but with real people who had a home, and a porch, and big trees out in front — as in Tarryville! To Toad Jessup the change of name meant very little, as did his memories of his one ancestor, his "old man," long since deceased and not much use when living. Indeed, Toad had only retained his original name because his two adopted fathers

could not agree on a substitute, neither Wallingdaw nor Dawlingford seeming to quite fit the boy. With Jimmy the case was different. His family, he began to find, had meant a great deal to him, and he felt like a traitor; as if he were somehow setting up a life which other folk might share, and casting his own people out of it — forever!

Perhaps it was the dimness of the big lawn back there which made it like any other dim lawn one chose to remember, or perhaps it was the loneliness of having heard the front gate click behind Tal and Grandma, but at any rate Sweet Patootie, as she shot down towards the boulevard lights, contained a solid dead weight of homesickness which no soft purring could lighten. Or, perhaps again, it was telepathy, for on the big porch at Tarryville, some hundreds of miles away, at this very hour the friendly quartette sat in the poignant silence of homesickness, while the crickets and tree toads accentuated the stillness with their strident voices, and the bull frogs in some distant marsh croaked unceasingly.

CHAPTER IV

THE BIRTH OF THE BIG HOPE

If a man were to enter business in Fawnlake City at, say, the age of twenty-four, and if he were diligent and patient, he could amass a big white house and a lawn, a decent bank account and three or four children by, say, the age of forty-four; but there was that in the blood of the son of Get-Rich-Quick Wallingford which refused to thrill at this comfortable prospect. In brief, a week of earnest investigation had shown conclusively to James Wall that the only glittering inducement offered by this town was Mary Curtis. This inducement he had studied under every possible circumstance; on portico, lawn and shaded hill; in Sweet Patootie, in a rowboat on the little lake, and afoot; by sunlight, twilight, electric light, starlight and moonlight; and he had found the inducement flawless. Man alive, he had to stay in Fawnlake City! So behold him, in his shirt sleeves in his room at the Splendide, entirely surrounded by statistics covering the business prospects of the town better than the inhabitants thereof knew themselves; and thus Toad found him when he burst into the room with:

"Say! Jimmy! What do you think?" His pompadour quivered and his eyes snapped and his very freckles seemed to dance as he threw on the writing table a couple of grimy rocks. "There's oil on the Curtis farm!"

"Oil!" and in a high state of excitement Jimmy jumped to the door and closed it. "Who said so?"

"I say so! There's oil down there some place or the hundred per cent mark I got in geology was a dang lie!"

"Then I'll say there's oil," agreed Jimmy, but curbed his enthusiasm. "Are you certain enough of it to gamble our eight hundred dollars? It's all we have, remember."

"Well, I'm sure of the oil, but you have to be sure of the gamble. There might be only a spoonful when we got it, or we might have to dig so far down that we'd have legal complications with the property owners at the other end in China, but I'll say *oil!* Look at those rocks!"

"Hunh!" Jimmy picked up one of the rocks and dropped it and brushed off his fingertips, then he looked at Toad speculatively. "Have you told Tal about it?"

"Certainly not. I hit it straight up for here. I wouldn't tell anybody about anything till I'd seen you. Now listen, Jimmy. We have eight hundred dollars, and I'll bet we can make an arrangement with Tal to sink a well on his place, and divide fifty-fifty."

"And if we don't strike oil we're broke," drawled Jimmy. Moving over to the window he lounged against the jamb and looked out musingly. They were cleaning the lake. The sluice gates were open the full length of the dam, and a cataract was pouring through with a mighty roar. He watched the process curiously, as if that alone interested him. The water was lowering in the lake at a remarkable rate, and the one little motorboat which Fawnlake boasted was streaking it for the dam to avoid being left in the mud. Suddenly Jimmy turned from the window, and his eyes were narrowed and a smile was on his lips. But Toad was gone — down to the drug store for some chemicals to analyze those rocks. Jimmy, still smiling, began to sort and bunch together certain of his statistics, the details

of the one big possibility which he had discovered but had not found any way to make himself a part of. He looked at himself in the mirror as he put his tabulations in his pocket, and studied himself critically. The son of Get-Rich-Quick Wallingford was going after big game, and he wondered if his trigger finger would be steady when he sighted his buck. It had to be, doggone it! There was a Mary Curtis in the world. An hour later he was in Fillamore, forty miles away, and calling on the president of the A. I. and E. Railroad! That gentleman was a mighty satisfied looking party, large, solid, iron gray, and sitting easily in his big chair without lolling. He surveyed his visitor with pleasure, as he surveyed all things which were agreeable to gaze upon, and observed heartily, while glancing at the clock:

"Well, young man, speak up. My car will be down from the siding in thirty-five minutes."

"I'll try to hurry," said young James Wall pleasantly. "Mr. Burrowes, I've come to see you about running a branch line into Fawnlake City."

"It's a dead issue. Fawnlake City knocked at the door a long time ago, and we decided that the amount of business we'd get there wouldn't pay interest and depreciation on the cost of building the branch."

"Well," smiled Jimmy, "when a fellow wants to accomplish anything, he's got to start planning with the idea that the first answer will be 'no'; so now we're past that point."

Mr. Burrowes laughed, and looked at Jimmy with somewhat more of interest; nice looking boy, clear-eyed, smooth-cheeked, healthy, bright and snappy. He didn't look like Fawnlake City, however.

"Are you a committee of one from the Boosters' Association back there, or what?"

"I'm a private interest," grinned Jimmy. "I may as well tell you that if your road should come through there, it will probably make me a lot of money."

"Good," laughed President Burrowes. "That's better than having a patriotic fervor for your town, or merely having a friendly regard for my welfare, because now I know that your arguments are sincere. What are they?" He glanced at the clock, but his gaze shot right on past. So long as he was amused, it didn't matter if they had to hold his private car awhile. They could run Number Four around it.

"Well," went on Jimmy, drawing a long breath as he prepared to plunge, and producing a mass of pocket size card board memorandum slips. "Perhaps you haven't kept actual track of the more recent growth of Fawnlake City. Here is the increase of bank deposits, year by year for ten years." He laid down a pink card. "Here the increase of tax valuation in the county." A blue card. "Here the increase of commercial investment." A yellow card. "Here the increase of natural output from the surrounding territory, crops, cattle, hides and the like." A green card. "Here the increase of population." A white card. "Here the increase of shipping over the G. and W. road." A purple card. He spread them out, in order, in front of President Burrowes. He was proud of this job. His own father couldn't have done better. "And here, a combined tabulation of the other reports, showing the estimated percentage of Fawnlake City's advancement as a commercial center, and its attraction for a common carrier."

President Burrowes glanced at the larger size orange card with a highly trained professional eye; glanced at the others perfunctorily, wiped his glasses carefully and replaced them in his pocket, stuck a cigarette in a long holder, lit it, and smiled paternally at his eager young visitor.

"Looks good," he admitted. "I must compliment you on the thoroughness and compactness of your commercial report, and I have no doubt that, on this showing, if it is correct, and I assume it to be from the earnestness of your bright brown eye, my road could earn a more or less profit on a branch run into Fawnlake City; but the inducement is not enough."

"Now we're past that point," laughed Jimmy, Jr., in no wise cast down. President Burrowes, looking at his keen self-confidence, felt for the first time a trace of irritation. He despised to be forced into anything, and he laid his cigarette down carefully across his pen rack, to state with impressiveness:

"Look here, young man, there's one thing you don't understand, I have a fine country place, I have a house here in town, I have apartments in New York, I have a yacht, all my children are married and doing well, and I go fishing two months in the year and hunting two months in the year. I own nearly the total stock in the A. I. and E. Railroad, and it earns dividends enough to let me do all these things which I have mentioned. I'm as placid and contented as a jellyfish in a warm pool, and, believe me, I have no dream of empire! If a man were to bring me control of the entire combined railroad systems of the United States, and tell me that he could make me own them and run them, I'd shoot him."

Ouch! The business expert of the Wall Brothers had not figured on this possibility, and for the first time he began to feel his youthful, self-confident assurance slipping. He began to feel that he had artificially braced himself to talk and act like, and to be, a regular business man, instead of an amusing amateur, a precocious kid who could get a good laugh by asserting that he could lick the policeman on the corner! But even while this depression rose ferociously out of his heart and made a clutch at his weazand, he happened to notice certain little lines around President Burrowes' eyes, and that the eyes themselves were the only part of his face which did not display satiated satisfaction. They could still be eager! Jimmy now began to reflect that the man who had built up the A. I. and E. Railroad into a fine dividend paying proposition, and had managed to obtain most of the stock for himself, must have been open, at one time, and for a good long stretch of time at that, to the little item of personal advantage, to the lure of profits, and to the pleasure of extending his money-making capacity. As Jimmy reflected, unconsciously his own eyes narrowed with shrewdly constructive thought; and President Burrowes noted it and said abruptly:

"Now, what's the jolly idea? Your time's up."

"Well, I've just decided that you'll listen after all to the next point," said Jimmy briskly. "Maybe you have no dream of empire, but you do want to keep what you have. I can tell you some news about an old-time competitor for your southern trade — the G. and W. Railroad."

"The G. and W.?" Mr. Burrowes picked up his cigarette again, took one puff, threw it away vigorously, and

blew the smoke out of the holder. "What's new about the G. and W.?"

Jimmy nonchalantly tossed down a little blank book.

"I may have a lot of presumption in suggesting what I am going to, because you no doubt are more familiar with the situation than I am; but I happened to learn the other day in the G. and W. station master's office at Fawnlake City that there was talk of throwing that road into the hands of a receiver, which means new management. So I got together all the available statistics concerning it and those figures, boiled down to a couple of glances worth, are in this little book. The controlling stock can be had for a song, and if you were to secure the G. and W. and run a branch through my town, making a junction between the A. I. and E. and the G. and W. — "

He stopped abruptly because, quite as abruptly, President Burrowes had risen from his seat, pushed back his chair with the straightening of the crook of his thick legs, and strode to his map; and Jimmy, looking at that stodgy back, relaxed in his chair and took a moment's breathing space. As abruptly as before, President Burrowes turned from his map, grabbed for the evening paper on his desk, looked at that day's stock quotations, and wheeled briskly to Jimmy.

"By George, young man, I'll do it!" he said. He was no longer satisfied, but he was happy. "I've been watching that situation like a lazy dog watching a fly, but now I'll have to snap!"

"Thanks," drawled Jimmy, his weazand clear of that threatened clutch, old man Depression gone from his heart, and a little bird singing there. Then he hesitated. "Now, Mr. Burrowes, I have a little favor to ask of you."

"Naturally," laughed the President.

"And it's this. Would you mind not announcing your plans for a while?" Before he began, he had known just as well as now that he would see that alert, darkening look, that suspicion of the experienced man, that on-guard expression. "I may as well tell you just why. I'm about to dig an oil well there; and I wish you to take note of the fact that I did not use the probability of striking oil as an argument for your putting your branch into Fawnlake City."

"Smart boy! It would have weakened your case, because I would immediately have said that you couldn't know whether you would strike oil or not."

"I suppose that was the reason," admitted Jimmy with his quiet smile. "But you can readily see, also, Mr. Burrowes, that if your plans are announced before I know whether or not we'll strike oil, it will make quite a difference in certain property values; just on the pure psychology of it."

President Burrowes looked at young James Wall with still another degree of interest, then he shook hands with him warmly.

"I'm with you. And now, turn about's fair play. If you mention my plans to a living soul, I'll be held up for that G. and W. stock; so mum's the word between us, eh?" and they shook hands on it. Such twinkling-eyed shrewdness passed between them with that handshake, that Burrowes' attention was arrested by it, and he patted Jimmy's hand in quite a fatherly manner, beaming on him affectionately as he added; "My boy, I hope you won't take offense at what I'm going to say. I think you're about the smartest kid I've met — and you want to watch out for it."

Jimmy felt the color coming up into his face. He wondered if Burrowes had noticed those lobeless ears; and down in him burned deep resentment.

"I'll try to, sir," he said, and he was half way back to Fawnlake City before he discovered that he was running at top racing speed — as if there had been certain things which could be merely outrun!

When the perplexed and gloomy Toad returned from the Einstein Picture Palace, he found Jimmy at the table in his shirt sleeves, collar and tie thrown aside, shirt open at the neck, a cigar between his fingers; and on his round pink face, as he studied maps and figures, was the content of constructive abstraction. Toad was startled. Except for the weight and bulk he might have been looking at J. Rufus himself!

"Oh, hello Toad!" and Jimmy's quiet musing gave way instantly to youthful enthusiasm. "I have it! The oil well is on!"

"That was a cinch!" returned Toad, in no wise surprised. He sat down impatiently, and lit his pipe. "What's the rest of the story?"

"Railroad! Toad, since I saw you, I've secured a new railroad for this town, and the only way it can logically come into Fawnlake City is through that gap in Tal Curtis's hills."

"Oh, fine!" That didn't seem a sufficient expression for Toad's amazement and delight, so he straddled a chair and said it again; "Oh fine, fine, fine!" He laughed and then he stared and then he laughed again. "Why, say! Jimmy! Why a railroad coming through there would make Tal Curtis a rich man again! You know Tal has about gone broke paying taxes on that farm. It won't grow

anything but rocks and pennyroyal, and he only keeps it because he can't sell it, and because his grandfather used to shoot deer there, when the Curtises were the only aristocrats in the county and owned most of it. I'd like to see Talbot Curtis rich again!"

"Yes." There was a slight straightening of the smile on Jimmy's lips, a slight twinkle in his eyes. "But of course, Toad, if we're the means of making him rich, I should think we might have a right to be in on it. With your oil well we can, I think, get a half interest in that land."

"That is, if we strike oil," amended Toad, nodding sagaciously.

"If we'd strike oil, we wouldn't need it," corrected Jimmy. "What we do need is some way to get back our eight hundred if we don't strike oil; hence the railroad to give Tal's property a worthwhile value. And here's how we get our share. If we form a stock company, and get Curtis to pay for his stock with his land, we paying for our stock with digging the oil well, then the property will belong to the company from that minute, and we, owning half the stock, will consequently own half the land, oil or no oil."

"Great gosh!" Toad stared long and silently, and there was discomfort in the manner with which he tamped and tamped at the tobacco in his pipe. "Say, Jimmy," he blurted at last, "don't throw anything, but that sounds an awful lot like your dad."

"Doesn't it?" Jimmy was distinctly disturbed, then he turned back to his figures and his maps and his musing; but finally he looked up with a quiet smile. "It would make it straight, I know, if I could tell Mr. Curtis about the railroad; but I can't. I'm under promise not to. So

I've decided for Mr. Curtis. He takes the gamble! We'll go right over."

"Anyhow there's oil there!" declared Toad, his brow clearing. "And say! I've dug out the name of our well. It's the Big Hope.

CHAPTER V

A KISS FOR SWEET PATOOTIE

"My, my, don't I hear Sweet Patootie?" quavered Grandma Curtis, to whom Sweet Patootie was now, and ever, the crowning event of an interested lifetime; and Mary Curtis pushed back her coffee cup and rose hastily, for the Wall brothers were usually later at dinner than the Curtises were at supper, seldom arriving on the hill before the dishes were cleared away. What could it be? Good-bye? And little Mary paled! But no, it couldn't be good-bye with all that excitement in the footsteps which clattered up on the portico, and into the house and straight back to the dining room. No, not good-bye, as Mary saw instantly from the face of Jimmy, and her pallor gave way to a wave of delicate color as she lowered her eyes. How different Jimmy was tonight! There was something exultant in him, something triumphant, something of proprietorship, too, as she felt by a sort of quivering telepathy when he came and stood by her, while Toad vociferated, almost yelled:

"Say! We've come to form a company! There's oil on your property!"

No bomb shell could have created more havoc in the placid peace of this tall old colonial dining room. Even the cut crystal chandelier and the delicate Venetian glassware on the enormous mahogany sideboard seemed to share the thrill of the astounding news; for immediately

they began to tinkle and to ring in sympathy with the excited commingling of voices, all talking at once, after the first instant of stupefaction. Oil! There was magic in the very word that so smacked of riches, and, smacking so, held forth a promise of the rehabilitation of the Curtis fortunes, a restoration into the good graces of that fine-featured old face which had so long looked down at them accusingly from the gold frame over the buffet; Great-Grandfather Curtis, who had builded this house, when his broad acres had made him wealthy, and stocked it with the sort of furniture and rugs and paintings and books and silver and glassware which a gentleman of his breeding should have in his home. Happiness, nothing but happiness in the excitement of the three born Curtises, but in the excitement of the Curtis who had been born Bozzleweed, there was a tremor much like pathos. It had been so difficult for Talbot's wife to preserve the unbending backbone which was the Bozzleweed idea of what the Curtis pride should be, while, year after year, she had seen the Curtis possessions drift away through Tal's good-natured incompetence, until now there was only left this homestead, mortgaged, and the ridge strip which could not be mortgaged; happily. Oil! Magic in the word, with its smack of riches, and though Mother Curtis bended not one joint of her neck, she did, when none observed, surreptitiously place a straight finger to the corner of an eye and remove a hint of moisture which threatened to become a drop.

Out of this pulsating moment The Big Hope Oil Company sprang into existence full grown, and was led into the stately old library by the business expert of the Curtis family, his face beaming with infantile delight and his

white curls bobbing; for it transpired that Talbot Curtis was by profession an attorney, though seldom working at it, except to administer the estates of a few deceased testators, friends. Out of one of the tall mahogany bookcases Tal brought down a yellow-backed book on corporation law, and nothing in all this world could exceed the gusto with which he engineered the prospective incorporators and stockholders of The Big Hope Oil Company through the preliminary stages of its being! What a thrill there was in that process to all these amateurs who had never before incorporated! How awe-inspiring to select officers, and become used to official titles! Offices, of course, for every one: Talbot Curtis, president; James Wall, secretary; Edward Wall, treasurer; Emily Curtis, vice-president; Mary Curtis, second vice-president; Grandma Lucy Curtis, third vice-president! All settled, all in apple pie order, with one hundred shares of stock of no par value, James and Edward Wall twenty-five shares each, Talbot and Emily Curtis twenty-four shares each, Mary and Grandma Curtis one share each; fifty-fifty, the Walls and the Curtises, and no advantage on either side, everybody satisfied, everybody happy, though Toad Jessup rasped his wiry pompadour when it was breathlessly over. Now they owned half of the Curtis property! Oh well, dang it all, the thing was perfectly right! Tal's worthless land wouldn't have had the prospect of a railroad except for Jimmy, so what was wrong? Nothing; only, somehow or other, Toad liked openness; secrecy in itself seemed crooked — especially when Jimmy's morals were at stake. Toad hadn't said anything about it, but probably no member of the Wallingford and Daw families was more concerned about Jimmy's morals than Toad Jessup!

Oh, well, dang it all, there was oil there anyhow, and that would straighten everything out!

When he reached this comforting conclusion, which should now last him for good and all, Secretary Jimmy, Treasurer Eddie and Second Vice-President Mary stood at the gate, with the crickets and tree toads creaking here, and the bull frogs croaking yonder, and the stars twinkling in the sky overhead, and the fragrance of the jasmine all about them, and Fawnlake City spread out below them like a fairyland at the verge of its moonlit lake. It was here that the Second Vice-President said softly and happily in her voice which was like a silver bell:

"So you're going to stay in Fawnlake City!"

"You said it!" vociferated, almost yelled, Toad, and gave the arm of Mary, which was hooked in his, a frank and sturdy squeeze. She scarcely noticed it, for she was distinctly conscious that Jimmy was looking down at her, and smiling; and there was some exquisite telegraphy between them, a telegraphy with thrills and quivers in place of dots and dashes. So, on this wonderful, this marvelous, this miraculous night began the new life of the young man who had come out into the world to find for himself what was in him, whether honest or not, away from the influences which had protected him from the "big test," and away from the influences which might affect the known son of Get-Rich-Quick Wallingford; and the beginning seemed good.

Next morning the dawn had to step lively to get out of the way of The Big Hope Oil Company, for when the Secretary and Treasurer thereof removed themselves bag and baggage from the expensive Hotel Splendide the night clerk was still on duty; and the first clerk on duty in the

sporting goods department of the Big Store sold them a tent, two cots, four pairs of overalls, and a camp cooking outfit. The President and First, Second and Third Vice-Presidents were up in the oil district, selecting a spot in the deepest hollow for a place to dig when the Secretary and Treasurer arrived, and not more than two hours after this, Fawnlake City knew that Jimmy and Eddie Wall, who had been chasing around the country in their fancy car with the Curtis family, were sinking an oil well on Tal's farm. Immediately Fawnlake City strolled up there to see about it, found Jimmy and Eddie erecting the resident headquarters of the company, and President Tal Curtis watching them with untiring industry from a seat on a rock ledge which nature had obligingly fitted with a footstool and an elbow rest. Its duty performed, Fawnlake City went away, impressed but not excited. No one had ever heard of oil existing around Fawnlake City, and if there should be any, it wouldn't be found on Tal Curtis's place! It was just like two kids to think all they had to do was dig a hole somewhere and strike oil, and just like Tal to be in for such a wild-cat scheme. Much more interesting was the "case" between Mary Curtis and Jimmy Wall! They were smitten, not a mite of doubt about it! And what would Bertram Beegoode have to say when he came back, to find his pretty Mary, the most popular girl in town, nabbed up by a city stranger? He! he! Bertram's father, Henry, was the richest man in town, and he went up to Tal's right after he had closed his bank for the day; for Henry owned the mortgage on Tal's homestead, and though Henry was never willing to take a chance, he was always eager to investigate a possibility, so that he should know exactly what to do if the possibility ever became an

actuality. President Burrowes, too, having motored over, as if casually, to pursue certain secretive investigations, paid a little visit to the Curtis hill and shook hands with his mum young friend Jimmy, and gazed with pleasure on the honest freckles of Jimmy's brother Edward; then the excitement died down, and the Big Hope Oil Company was left alone to dig. Day by day the stalwart young Wall brothers, looking wholesome and happy in their overalls, bent their backs and knotted their muscles at the hand winch of their hand-made derrick, for far be it from these young men just starting life to disdain manual labor, a resolution mightily approved by President Talbot Curtis as he unflaggingly watched operations, palm leaf fan in hand. So, inch by inch and foot by foot, and dollar by dollar, that long rope and the expensive casings were swallowed by the dust-dry earth — till it was all in!

A thousand feet down, and no oil! — and no more money! The six incorporators and stockholders stood around the hole in thoughtful silence. You could wind that drill a thousand feet up and let it drop a thousand feet down, as often as you liked, and it wouldn't hit anything, for the drill had gone as far as it would go with that length of rope.

"My, my!" quavered the soft voice of Grandma. "Isn't it a pity, because just at any time any one foot more might strike the oil! Can't we attach a few more feet of rope?"

"Can't be done, Grandma," promptly answered Toad, and rasped his pompadour, "because we couldn't work this hand winch with another pound of rope, if we had it. We'd need a donkey engine. That costs money. Dang!"

Another silence. The Big Hope Oil Company had much food for thought.

"Well, I'll declare," said Talbot Curtis, shaking his head till his curls bobbed and danced, "if I had a dollar I could lay my hands on, I'd put it in, I declare I would!"

"Yes, Tal, I declare you would," stated his wife, with grim conviction.

"Yes, mother," agreed Talbot, meekly, but there was no shade of annoyance or any other unpleasant thing, not even regret, on his guileless face. "Never mind, Honey," this to Mary, whose eyes were swimming with disappointment, "sumpin'll happen yet."

Mary smiled, and out of the smile came a little half-hysterical giggle. For two solid weeks now with every thump of that drill she had hoped that the next thump would bring the golden flood of oil to enrich her father and, — well, The Big Hope Oil Company in general; and now it was all over!

Jimmy dropped the towel with which he was mopping his brow and neck and arms, and studied gravely the blisters in his palms.

"Anyhow," said he, cheerfully, "now we won't have to winch up that rope by hand any more." He smiled his quiet little smile, and turned to Toad. "Still think there's oil there, Spots?"

"I said there was oil down there," stoutly maintained Toad, "or else I don't know a dang thing about geology."

"Then I'll say there's oil," maintained Jimmy, "and we'll have to get an engine and dig for it. I suggest we hold a meeting, and vote an issue of stock, and I'll go out and try and sell it. I think I can get somebody to buy it."

"Isn't that wonderful, mother!" marveled Talbot

Curtis, surveying Jimmy's quiet smile with admiration. "You know I reckon he could sell it. I declare I do believe he could!"

"But, Father," Mary's troubled voice. "If we sell any stock, won't that mean that we have to share the profits with whoever buys it?"

"All the profits if there are any," corrected Mother Curtis, who was not a pessimist, but just simply couldn't see big; nor had her experiences with Talbot encouraged her in the art.

"Oh, no, not all the profits Mrs. Curtis," drawled Jimmy, and now the quiet smile of his father was in his eye. "It isn't customary for additional stockholders in any enterprise to get all, or even a large share of the profits. I've been reading up on stock companies, and stock company laws. The additional funds will not come out of your profits. It couldn't in fairness, because our agreement was that you were to put in the land for your share of the stock, and we were to dig the well in payment of our share. So we'll do this. We'll issue a new block of stock, half common, which will participate in all the profits, if there are any, and half preferred, which will draw seven per cent from the date of issue. We'll give you the common and Toad and I will take the preferred and sell it for whatever we can get for it, to continue the operations."

Talbot Curtis drew a long breath; he had followed this explanation comma by comma and period by period, and he prided himself that he understood it thoroughly, as did none other except Toad and Jimmy.

"That sounds fair enough, and it's legal! You did agree to furnish all the money for digging the well, didn't

you, and I did agree that the land should belong to the company. We're not cheating them any, mother."

"Not you," agreed mother with equal enthusiasm. "Just the same, if they don't strike oil, we're out our land."

"My, my, Emily!" murmured Grandma.

"Well, you have to give something for a chance to get rich, haven't you?" countered Tal, and suddenly remembering that he was President, he pounded on his rock seat, called the meeting to order and they formally agreed to issue the stock.

That afternoon Jimmy dressed himself in his flawless business suit and went into town, to arrange for the sale of the stock as soon as it should be authorized by the secretary of state; whereupon the natural course of all things financial in Fawnlake City gravitated him to Henry Beegoode in the dingy plastered private office of the Fawnlake Bank. Henry was a small, oldish-looking man with dried, mutton-chop whiskers, with pendulous lobes on his wrinkled ears and with greenish eyes like chilled steel gimlets; his fingernails, if he had let them grow, would have curled right over and become talons, the front joints of all his fingers and thumbs bent inwards, his nose hooked down, his head hooked forward, and altogether he was formed by nature to grasp anything which came his way, and to hold it. He was like one of those desert spiders which can wax fat on anything or nothing, find juice in a dried cactus leaf or meat on a dried sand gnat, and there was something of that hungry search about him when he gazed on the nice plump form of young Jimmy, and he listened with keen interest to the ingratiating arguments of the financial member of The Big Hope Oil Company as if searching for somewhere to insert

a proboscis into this dry husk of opportunity and suck its blood.

"So you think there's oil on Tal Curtis' rock farm, eh?" he said, with a chuckle which was more like a cough. "Maybe so, maybe so. Tell me; how is your company formed?"

Jimmy told him, and managed meanwhile to take stock of everything in Henry Beegoode's dingy old office and on his dingy old desk.

"So! Pretty shrewd for a boy. You've got Tal's whole farm in for his share, not just the oil claim. And the whole farm belongs to the company! Oh, I suppose I'm a foolish old man. In spite of the fact that there hasn't been any oil found within two hundred miles of here, I believe in giving bright young fellows a chance; so, if you'll make the price right, I don't mind buying that stock," and he drew toward him a sheet of paper and uncorked a fountain pen.

"Thank you." Jimmy's quiet eyes had been resting contemplatively on Henry Beegoode throughout the latter's entire speech, and now they followed the hand which reached for the paper and the hand which uncorked the fountain pen. Some sixth sense stirred in Jimmy, something which kept him from being properly joyous over this unexpectedly easy victory.

"Now let me understand, young man," went on Henry. "This is preferred stock you're offering me, and it's the only issue, and the entire issue, and there won't be another without my sanction."

"Yes sir." Jimmy's tone was less troubled now, and his inspection of certain objects on Henry's desk more leisurely.

"All right, I'll take the whole issue then. What price shall we say? A couple of thousand dollars should be sufficient to complete your operations."

"I think I'll have to figure it over," responded Jimmy, rising, and the slight shade of disapproval on Henry Beegoode's countenance confirmed him, not only in his intuitive feelings, but in the deductive conclusion drawn from these intuitive feelings.

"Three thousand anyhow ought to send you down far enough to strike oil, or give up the job. But that's the limit! And I'll tell you, young man, you won't get another offer as good as that in the town, for I know every dollar that's here, and what the owner dares to do with it!"

"Three thousand is better, but before I conclude any definite arrangements I'll have to see my partners. Good day, Mr. Beegoode," and striding toward the door Jimmy put on his hat.

"I'll tell you something, young man!" shrilled Henry, half rising in his seat; and even his arms curved as he rested them on the desk, and his legs curved, and one more pair of legs and a pair of antennæ would have made a spider of him indeed, with his round fat paunch and his lean extremities. "I'll make it thirty-five hundred, but I won't promise to hold this offer open! I'm liable not to be so generous by the time I cool off!"

"I'm sorry, Mr. Beegoode, but I must consult my partners," and Jimmy closed the door after him, gently.

Down at the curb stood the beautiful, beautiful car! Its half-owner cast loving eyes along its clean lines and into its comfortable cushions, and as he took his seat he patted it affectionately on the wheel; then he whizzed out to the headquarters of The Big Hope Oil Company, plunged into

the tent with no answer for the torrent of questions which Toad poured at him, dug out Tal's book on corporation laws, leafed rapidly through it until he found a certain paragraph, read it and looked up with eyes which pinched almost shut and burned in the center.

"I thought so!" he snapped. "That preferred stock would constitute a first mortgage lien on our farm, and if we fail to find oil and pay dividends, the holder of the preferred stock could take possession of this whole property. I was a dummy! And another thing! On Henry Beegoode's desk I saw a prospectus map of the future Fawnlake City, showing a railroad coming from the west right through this gap! It's a certainty that Beegoode saw Burrowes! Where's Mr. Curtis?"

"Oh Tal!" yelled Toad, poking his head out of the tent. "Hustle up, Jimmy wants to see you!"

President Tal, out in the garden digging his potatoes, one at a time, straightened up instantly and with pleasure slipped off the apron which he wore to protect his pongee trousers. He came over the hill with the happiness of a boy relieved from the chores.

"Tal, call a meeting of the company," ordered Jimmy. "We're going to rescind that resolution to issue new stock." Tal obediently nodded, thus illustrating that there are no communistic organizations or any other than one-man governments. "I'm too ignorant to monkey with business intricacies, so Eddie and I will finance this company out of our own resources."

"You're goana write home!" immediately guessed Toad, with exultation. He was not above sacrificing any fool principles of pride and independence where they interfered with practical results.

"No, I'm not! We're going to sell the car."

"Ah, pshaw! Oh, pshaw! Isn't there any other way?" Tal pondered miserably, then hope suggested the method by which he had lived at ease so long as the Curtis ancestral estates had lasted. "Can't you mortgage it?"

A laugh greeted that idea.

"Hardly. So far as I've been able to judge, a mortgage is the best plan ever devised for selling property at the least possible price, and at the same time still owing the money."

"Mother ought to hear you say that," chuckled Tal whom God had blessed with a disposition to find happiness under any circumstances.

"Aw, Jimmy," worried Toad, "Grandma will miss that car! She likes it better than any of us, I think, especially when we strike a straight stretch and hit it up to about eighty! And say, Jimmy, listen! That's the dandiest engine ever put under a hood!"

The son of J. Rufus turned on him savagely.

"Look here, do we have a car or do we have an oil well? If you think I'm giving up this racer because I hate it, you're mistaken! And by the way." He paused a moment. "I've been thinking. This is no market for a high-priced car like ours. We'd never get the money for it." He looked up with a start as the entrance darkened. Mary stood there, smiling in at them, and Jimmy gulped. "So we'll have to drive the car back east to sell it."

"Whoop!" yelled Toad. "Home!" Then he suddenly grabbed for his handkerchief and blew his nose — so violently that he had to wipe his eyes.

"Well, yes," and Jimmy grinned. "My ethical stand won't keep me from selling this property where we can

get the highest price for it; and I know how fond of Sweet Patootie a certain large, plump party is. We're going to take a little trip home, Mary," and walking straight out of the tent, he took Mary's arm and strolled with her down the hill. At the ditch behind the big rocks where he always helped her across, though she was lithe and agile and did not need help when she was alone, they were both nervous, and her foot slipped when he set her down. He was forced to catch her in his arms, and her head rested on his shoulder for a moment — accidentally! Of such accidents are the steel and tinder of youth, and the sparks that fan into flame. Jimmy hadn't struck oil yet, he hadn't made good, and wasn't in position to tell his right name; but mortal young man would be but a feeble creature indeed were he able to resist such a fate-flung opportunity! His arm tightened around little Mary, and drew her yielding body closer. Slowly she raised her eyes as his head bent down, and there was great tenderness in their velvety brown depths; and that tenderness stopped him. He must deserve it! Suddenly, as he hesitated, Jimmy had the shock of his life, for the little devils sprang into Mary's eyes, and raising her head swiftly, she pressed her warm lips on his.

"That's a kiss for Sweet Patootie," she breathlessly informed him, and laughing, sprang away and ran down the hill.

CHAPTER VI

A BOOM COMES INTO TOWN

As the Wall brothers left Fawnlake City, headed east around the lake and across the sandy waste on the other side, there came in from the west, over the hill past Curtis's and down the road which became Main Street, a plenty-good-enough blue runabout in which sat a large and portly glum gentleman and a tall, lean man with black mustaches who was in a high state of irritability; and said the latter, as they speeded down toward the boulevard lights:

"The next time I go out on a pleasure trip I'll do my sight-seeing in company with a mad bull or a hyena with the hives! Get it, you? Get it?"

No answer. J. Rufus Wallingford gazed straight ahead, with lack-lustre eyes and a set droop in his usually smiling countenance. If he had only known that this was Jimmy's town! But he didn't, and not even the glint of the lake, shimmering away there beyond the green trees of the park at the foot of Main Street, aroused any sparkle in him, usually a quick observer of beauty of any sort.

"Oh shut up!" went on Blackie presently, exasperated past measure by the big fellow's silence. "If you can't answer civilly don't talk at all! If I had the gout I'd be sport enough to stand the pain by myself, and not take my temper out on my friends!"

Wasted. Not any amount of abuse would arouse J. Rufus from his deep set despondency, and Blackie

began to relent. He knew it wasn't the gout; it was conscience! Big Jim Wallingford had sailed through life serenely under the impression that he had no conscience, and now when it hit him hard enough for him to discover that he had one, he was developing the sensation to its fullest capacity; pampering it, steeping himself in it, straining it! He had a conscience. Oh, ye gods, he had a conscience! Curses! Also, deep satisfaction. Just as there is no zealot like an old ex-sinner, no temperance fanatic like an ex-drunkard, no prude like a woman who in youth was gaily the reverse, just so there could be no one more extravagant with secret remorse than this unscrupulous rascal! And it was all Jimmy! Where was he? Where! J. Rufus had driven that boy from home, forced him out into the temptations of a world of which none knew the temptations better than this same J. Rufus! On every hand there were pitfalls for the clever, glittering enticements for the shrewd, irresistible allurements for the strong! At any instant some simp might cross Jimmy's path with more money than the boy could resist, at any moment some boob might drag Jimmy into a dark corner and force the boy to rob him of his bank roll! If Jimmy had been reasonably stupid he might be considered safe, but he wasn't. J. Rufus was the father of that son, and knew him well. He was a bright boy, a clever boy, a shrewd boy, a boy with a fine brain and quick wits, with good looks and pleasant manners, with an ingratiating smile and a frank eye which would gain the confidence of any one; and there was no hope for him! In all Get-Rich-Quick Wallingford's imagination he could not see how a young man, gifted as Jimmy was gifted, could go into a universe so thronged with fools who had money, and stay

straight! And it was all J. Rufus's fault! He had bestowed on his offspring those brains, that ingratiating manner, that handsome exterior; and woe it was!

"Nice looking town, Jim." Friend Blackie, really concerned about Wallingford's state of mind, was now trying another bait. "Prosperous place; everybody seems to have money."

No answer.

"Money just rolling around loose here."

No answer.

"*Money!* I said *money!* MONEY! What's the matter with you, you fat crab! Oh, see little cutie!" "Little Cutie," who had suddenly attracted the sarcastic attention of Blackie, was a long, skinny, vigorous-faced woman of certain and positive age; a spinster, by all the signs, and an embittered one, who was now snipping, as if spitefully, at a rose bush on the lawn of the biggest and most resplendent and newest white house on Main Street, just before the beginning of the boulevard lights. Caroline Beegoode, eldest child of Henry; and to her, by way of vindictiveness, Blackie flaunted a gay wave of the hand, an exaggerated leer, an eye-tight wink, and lastly a gracefully blown kiss. He had expected, nay hoped, that this would call forth at least a glare or a frown, to say nothing of a brick, so he was astounded when Caroline, after the first instant of incredulous stare, bridled and simpered, and holding up a rose twirled it coyly at the devilishly handsome stranger — then, for the first time in those days of dull driving, J. Rufus Wallingford gave signs of human animation. As they shot on past the Beegoode mansion and struck the smooth pave his broad shoulders heaved, and a chuckle welled up in his throat and his round face grew pink.

"You damn fool," he laughed.

"Thanks, old pal," responded Blackie, delighted. Now if he could only get him to wink! "Say, lamp the wealth. It's seldom you see three cast iron dogs and a cast iron deer on the same lawn. Looks to me like one of those angora towns; you know; wool so long that they'd be happier if it was sheared."

"No, Blackie, there isn't a fleece fat enough, or soft enough, to tempt me. I'm out of the shearing game for good, and I've thrown away the shears. If ever I do any business at all, it will be straight!"

"Well, what did you think I meant?" demanded Blackie indignantly. "I'm not proposing that we invest in a dark lantern and a crow bar, and make an arrangement with the chief of police. I'm willing to spend the rest of my life out of jail. Only hear me this, Brother Amen; if you were ever to start a straight business, you'd get skinned."

"It's a well-padded town all right," judged Wallingford with the care of a connoisseur as he inspected the neat, prosperous fronts of the shops on Main Street, and the heavy watch chains and fobs on the well-filled belts of the untroubled inhabitants, and the copper dome on the court house, and the spic and span spires of the churches, and more particularly the gutters. Clean as a whistle, those gutters; plenty of money in the city treasury, and no doubt a good sinking fund in the chamber of commerce. The judgment of a connoisseur, true, but the aloof admiration of a retired one. "Yep. The soft currency is here like a feather bed, but they may keep it, bless them one and all."

Hope died. Jim meant it in spite of the "kidding" phrase. Blackie stepped on the accelerator as he caught

sight of the Hotel Splendide sign, up against the blue sky over that imposing building.

"Oh, let's eat!"

A remarkable hotel for so small a town; a big tiled lobby with tiled columns; palms and clean white napery yonder in the dining room; snappy service everywhere, and back of it all, moving about briskly, a nervous, black-whiskered Italian at the sight of whom animation once more came into the eyes of J. Rufus, not that he knew the proprietor, but that he knew his kind. A suave head waiter, with the indefinable accent which comes only to a five-language man, offered his services at sight of these experienced looking travellers, and ventured to recommend for luncheon a *rhum omelette aux truffe*. The very tone of his voice warmed something dormant these days in the large *bon vivant*, and with a smile which wreathed his pink face like an auriole he passed a five dollar bill over his shoulder.

"We like every word you say, Oscar. Bring anything you fancy."

"And whatever you think goes with it, Oscar," added Blackie, passing him another bill.

A lucky accident, the finding of Oscar, and thereby it was a different J. Rufus Wallingford who walked out into the lobby, chose a large, leathern chair beneath some palms at the wide windows, lit a huge black cigar, and looked across the park and shimmering lake and shining yellow sands to where the bluish haze of late summer noonday blended the distant trees into the horizon. The world was a delightful place, and life was easy, and everything which he touched was soft! Blackie Daw, more restless, sat in the adjoining chair and lit a cigarette, and picked up a railroad folder and threw it down, and smiled at an impudent

bare-legged urchin who offered him a paper through the window, and paid a quarter for a copy of *The Morning Gazelle* when the newsy brazened his way past the doorman, and leafed through the paper and yawned.

"Some town, Jim; right up on its tippy toes. Rumors of a new railroad." He turned to the next column, while J. Rufus gazed dreamily out across the shimmering lake. "The Wall brothers have gone east to buy machinery for their prospective oil well." Blue wreaths of smoke curled lazily up from the cigar of the contented gourmet. "A shake-up in the G. and W. Railroad. Entire directorate thrown out, and control taken by President Burrowes of the A. I. and E. Thrilling, eh Jim?" J. Rufus comfortably crossed one big knee over the other. "Henry Beegoode predicts a real estate boom for Fawnlake City in the near future."

At last a movement of the placid ruminant creature in the soft leathern chair. He knocked the ashes from his cigar, he covered a yawn with his big palm, he uncrossed his legs, and said he, dreamily:

"It's a shame. Everything ripe, and nobody to pick the dripping peach!" He stifled another yawn. "I wonder who owns that stretch of brindle-colored drear on the other side of the lake."

Blackie controlled with an effort the thing which leaped within him, and disinterestedly replied:

"I don't know, how should I." Lazily rising, he strolled over to the desk, and presently strolled back, leaned over the chair of his partner and announced: "Henry Beegoode."

"Huh?" Wallingford looked up with a start, and here was a thing to note; he was chewing the end of his cigar,

which he had heretofore smoked delicately without even a tooth dent in its smooth roundness!

"Henry Beegoode owns that dun desert. He's president of the Fawnlake Bank, right here on the opposite corner, and Henry's in his office now, and the local estimate on the value of that sand is nothing per acre, minus, and none to carry. You might get it cheaper."

J. Rufus gazed across the lake, and no man might know what his small but sparkling blue eyes erected there, but certain it is that they erected something, and peopled it with busy persons passing rapidly to and fro and making noises. His was the mind which can but create; so he rose, chuckling

"Oh, well, come on. What's the use?"

They were just stepping off the curb to cross to the Fawnlake Bank when Blackie suddenly grabbed J. Rufus's arm, and with a grin pointed down the street.

"As we live, Onion Jones and a human mattress!"

Towards them toiled with shuffling gait two ragged wanderers, becindered and begrimed. One was a short, squat, stoop-shouldered man, with so full a growth of kinky red whiskers that they seemed to be a nest for his face; and bushy red eyebrows protruded over his narrowly squinted eyes which turned from side to side so furtively that one might speculate on whether they had not been trained to keep watch while the man slept. The other wanderer, as bald as an arc light globe was Onion Jones, so called because of his striking resemblance to that vegetable when peeled; and he hurried forward as fast as his battered feet would allow. When he spoke his voice had in it the husk of many a hard night.

"So help me, Blackie, if we'd 'a' missed you in this

town, Jim, we wouldn't 'a' lasted till the next! They had us in at Wicketsville." It wasn't necessary to state "in" where. "We was sellin' scrap iron an' couldn't prove whose it was. But neither could they, so they told us to beat it. We hit the sunshine just in time to see you roll away from your hotel, an' we asked where you'd gone, an' they said Fillamore an' tossed us out; so we rode the blind baggage to Fillamore; an' at Fillamore they said you'd asked the road route for the next best town, an' they tossed us out, an' we got booted off every brake beam on the G. and W. Railroad, but we're here. My God, was you goana leave again!"

"Not till you get your feet rested and a few squares inside of you," chuckled Wallingford, handing him some crinkling new bills by way of friendly cheer. "But where did you get the pink dawn?"

"In jail at St. Looey," and Onion motioned his companion with a stiff-elbowed jerk of his arm to come forward; then he sank his voice to a mysterious whisper; "This is Petrograd Pete, gents. He'll tell you his last name himself; I can't."

"Villicksknapfski," rumbled the stranger, his narrow eyes roving from the diamond on Wallingford's finger to the curb, up sidewise to Blackie's grin, swiftly across to the blue runabout, over to the brass-buttoned doorman, back to Wallingford's twinkling eyes for a fleeting instant, and down to the huge diamond in Wallingford's cravat.

"Pete's looking for a good reliable connection," observed Onion. "I can certify to him. He's my friend." "We don't seem to think of anything just now, Onion," considered Blackie. "All our murders have been committed."

"What's your friend's specialty," Wallingford wanted to know, "arson or mayhem?"

"He's an engineer! He can do anything you want done to an engine, anywheres!"

"That makes it easy," chuckled Wallingford. "Whenever we need an engine mutilated or disabled, we'll know where to have it done."

"Excuse me, gentlemen," objected Petrograd Pete. "I am an under-dog, and a passionate man when my rights are trampled on — I was an anarchist once, but they wouldn't let me work with them because I was too radical — but I'm gentle with an engine."

"That's something anyhow," grinned Backie. "A Bolshevik now, I suppose?"

"No. The Bolsheviki tossed me out. I'm too violent," and suddenly, as Pete cast his furtive eyes upward at Wallingford, his whiskers were parted by a smile so childlike that it belied all the craftiness in his face.

Both upper dogs burst into a loud laugh, and started across the street, Blackie calling back:

"See you later, Onion. Stick around, you and your passionate under-mutt."

"Well Pete, what do you think of 'em?" husked Onion. "Ain't they the princes!"

"I hate 'em!" asserted Pete vindictively, as he took his "split" of the money. "They're rich! It's the injustice of life! I'm as much of a crook as this man Wallingford, ain't I? Yes! Well, who's got all the money out of it? Him! Is that equality? No! I hate 'em.'" He ended with that astoundingly childlike smile, and Onion's round flat eyes rested on him in stupefaction. He had remained startled ever since the moment he met the thrilling Pete.

"Aw, you're just a nut," was his comforting conclusion, and it was at this moment that Wallingford turned on the steps of the bank and looked at the frowsy pair with disapprobation.

"Why did you tell those yeggs to stick around?" he demanded. "Look here, Blackie, I want you to distinctly understand that everything we do, for amusement or whatever purpose, is to be strictly on the level!"

"I'm glad to know it." Horace G. Daw smoothed his mustaches straight out. "I've always been sorry for your corrupt tendencies, Jim, and it pleases me to know that you've at last —"

"Oh, break it off; you have enough to tie your knot," interrupted J. Rufus. "My intention is this. We'll start the boom which this neat little metropolis should have, and we'll make a reasonable profit to pay our expenses and it will be good for the town."

"That's right, do the town good," cheerfully acquiesced Backie. "Do it good and see if I care."

"Can't you take anything seriously?" complained the man of sudden virtue, and opening the door he strode into the bank and inquired for Henry Beegoode, and was admitted to the private office on his impressive appearance alone; but no sooner had he laid eyes on Henry then he was attacked by a professional sensation so keen as to almost amount to a stomach cramp. Never, in all his career, had Get-Rich-Quick Wallingford beheld a mean human being who so roused in him the impulse to despoil of all his goods and chattels! Yet, such was the mighty strength of J. Rufus's noble resolutions, and so complete his reformation, that he sat down, put his hat on the desk, and stated his errand so meekly that he felt like a "sucker!"

"Oh yes, that property on the other side of the lake," said Henry, drawing in the moisture which had gathered in the corners of his lips at sight of these prosperous looking strangers. "That's mighty valuable property, gentlemen, for it's the only direction Fawnlake City can expand. What did you propose to do with it?" and his nose hooked down.

It wasn't temptation which now assailed Mr. Wallingford, it was just habit, to wish to tell Mr. Beegoode a clever this or that or an adroit so and so; but the instinct was promptly squelched; Mr. J. Rufus Wallingford reminded himself that today he was a man with a conscience, an honest man proceeding about a straightforward transaction, and as such it was compulsory and workmanlike to tell the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth. And he did it, covered with such visible virtue that Blackie Daw, looking around as if to find some intelligent eye to share the joke, happened to meet the simpering gaze of "Little Cutie!" There she stood in the doorway in all her fleshless blandishment, and Horace G., caught with that smile on his face, hadn't the presence of mind to take it off! It was distinctly a smile for Caroline, thereby, and roguishly she met it. Discerning, however, that there was bargaining afoot, she retired modestly into a corner where, as she listened, she became as alert, as eagle-eyed and as spider-like as her father.

A fine bargainer, Henry, far better at it than any "crook" could be; for a man who plans to get all the property of all his neighbors by strictly honest methods, as Henry had, must have a pickled walnut where his heart belongs, and must never mind the blood which drips when he takes his pound of flesh. With every crow's foot

pinched and every talon curved, he probed and probed into Wallingford's subdivision idea until he knew it all, and could see, so far as his imagination could expand, the last dollar of possible profit; then his way was clear. He wouldn't option that land, he wouldn't sell; he'd just let the suavely capable Mr. Wallingford and the smoothly glittering Mr. Daw go right ahead with their splendid plan and pay all the boom expenses and he'd lend them his local influence and allow them to keep all the profits — except the first ten thousand dollars they took in!

Ten thousand! Holy smoke! Why if J. Rufus hadn't indulged in the luxury of the truth he could have had that whole tract for a thousand — and welcome!

"Thanks for the Christmas mittens," he observed dryly, and rose to go; then he was suddenly attacked by a panic of ignorance. He remembered that, in starting to be honest, he was entering on a game with the details of which he was unfamiliar, and that perhaps to a straightforward, bona-fide promoter this would seem like a reasonable proposition. He glanced dubiously at Blackie, who was sullen and helped none. This conscience thing was all Jim's; not his! *Not* his!

"How much is there of this unclad Eden of yours?" Wallingford irritably demanded.

"Fifty acres. It's worth — it's worth — "

"What's the use? Yesterday it wasn't worth anything, but today suppose we hand each other a dollar, and draw up the agreement — or I'm on my way!"

"I'll ring for my lawyer," hastily returned Henry, and punched a button repeatedly.

"I think I'll be running along now, papa, and come back later," broke in Caroline, and swished over to the

desk, girlishly, to bid her papa good-bye; also, she raised her eyes coyly toward the dashing Daw. "I know you'll be wanting to discuss details with your new partners. Tee-hee!"

Henry Beegoode looked at his child in astonishment, and then he snickered. For twenty-five of her forty-five years, Caroline had been thrusting herself forward for introductions which had come to naught, and she was the family joke.

"This is my daughter Caroline, Mr. Wallingford and Mr. Daw," obliged her father; then he snickered again. "You don't happen either one of you to be a bachelor, do you?"

"Oh papa!"

Diabolic glee snapped in the small blue eyes of Mr. Wallingford, and he thrust forward the dashing Daw.

"This is the bachelor, Miss Beegoode!"

"Tee-hee, I don't see how it's possible!" tittered the skittish Caroline, and rushed to the door in youthful flustration, followed by the snicker of Henry Beegoode; and in that instant, during which Henry's head was turned away, there came an agonized "ouch" from J. Rufus and a tensely polite "I beg your pardon" from the bachelor who had, with hissing vindictiveness, ground his heel on the toes of his big friend and partner!

Then came in Mr. Beegoode's ever handy lawyer, Ebeneezer Terwixter, a scrawny-necked and hook-nosed old man who seemed like a reflection of his more acute master; and for half an hour they set forth and whereased and hereinbefored, and the deed was done. Fawnlake City's boom was on its way — and the Wall brothers were headed east!

CHAPTER VII

JIMMY SEES A STRANGER

Home! Only they who wander know the thrill there is in that magic word; and happy they, who, wandering, establish a home in another clime, for thus they have a thrill at both ends of the route. To be clasped in a mother's arms, after an absence, is a wonderful thing! And even if a fellow hasn't a mother, why, two adopted mothers are pretty good, especially when they're like Mother Fannie and Mother Vi; plenty good enough to sprinkle a few honest tears among a fellow's freckles. Only one disappointment; the men were not home, and of course no one knew where they were, it being the habit of those jovial pirates of the uncharted commercial seas not to write when they were sailing. Jimmy in particular had wanted to see his dad, though not about the car; that was a minor matter. Fannie bought it for J. Rufus out of J. Rufus's funds, and paid what they all soberly agreed to be a fair, just and reasonable price; the price he had paid before! Jimmy had just wanted to see his dad, well, because, under the circumstances, he particularly wanted to see him! But, oh fellow! that home cooking, and the home beds, and the home pampering, and all those things which make a man who is battling the world on his own account feel foolishly young again! Then there were all the old haunts to visit, lickety-split on the high gear; though without the seven lollypops, for the "On With the Jazz" Company was out now, testing its fortunes

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dead! Back there stood the derrick; the boys pointed to it; but the derrick wasn't what they wanted to see, so very slowly Jimmy released his brake and threw in his clutch and let Sweet Patootie slip down the hill; and something in him was cold. What was the matter? Devastation seemed to have settled on all Fawnlake City, for Main Street, too, had that lifeless, deserted feeling. Not a soul to be seen anywhere! Not a wagon rumbled or a motor whirred; yet, in spite of the silence and the desolation, there seemed to be a pulse of something ominous in the air. Suddenly, the blare of distant music! Ah! Yonder were people, way down town, two blocks this side of the park, where narrow Washington Alley crossed broad Main Street. Yes, here were people a-plenty, packed solidly along the sidewalk, overflowing the curb and out into the middle of the street, where the police by strenuous exertions kept open a shifting lane which elbowed out of the old alley. and ran straight down to the bandstand in the park.

Such excitement! Fawnlake City hadn't been so much on the *qui vive* since the local ball team had won the inter-county penant. Whoo-ee! Just everybody was there, the town and all its suburbs and all the farmers from miles around. But what a strangely bedecked and bedizened assemblage for sober Fawnlake City! Red Turkish fezzes were dotted thickly among the crowd, paper ones, true, but still fezzes — ten cents apiece plain or a quarter with a gold tassle. Red-fezzed vendors had them everywhere, long cylinders of them, and were darting hither and thither all through the crowd, selling fezzes like hot cakes; and there were balloon vendors, and popcorn peddlers, and peddlers of "hot dogs"; and peanut stands shrieked, and

the excitement quivered and throbbed all the way out Washington Alley to where it disappeared up Nanny Goat Bluff! What, *what* had happened to the town! What mighty force had set up all this mad commotion! What or whom had been potent enough to jar awake this lazy, somnolent community and set it into such a surge of fevered activity! Why look at Washington Alley! That once dingy thoroughfare, narrow and cobbled, was like the bazaars of Cairo or Bagdad or Damascus in its flaunting gaiety of color, while from every window and every balcony there hung a rug or a shawl or a length of cretonne or anything which might by any possibility be construed into an Oriental flavor! And look! There was an "On With the Jazz" poster! Just everything was happening!

"Hey! Hey! Hey! Hey!" A bare-legged urchin with a tattered straw hat in his hand came running down Washington Alley half a block ahead of three other urchins, all aching to tell the news. "Hey, hey! The parade's left the ball grounds!"

Instantly, while the urchins dashed away again, the excitement which had hitherto been general now became specific. Everybody who had been standing any place immediately moved to some place else, squirming and jostling and perspiring and craning their necks to the full extent of their cartilaginous accommodation. The cordon of police, all twenty-eight, who had been called in for this great occasion, leaving the rest of the town free to the burglars, now made a thorough job of pushing people back to the curb from one end of the course to the other, and then doing it all over again.

"Look out there! Gosh!"

A woman with a baby buggy who had been in the thick

of the crush all this time had suddenly darted from the perfectly secure shelter of a set of steps, just in time to collide with the push cart of a hokey-pokey man who was being driven off the street. Mad excitement! A dog fight broke out right at the bend of the elbow, and instantly a solid mass of humanity flowed from every curb and packed in a circle around those leaping, yelping animals. A scream! The woman with the baby buggy was caught in the very midst of the crush, and it took four policemen to get her out! Somebody turned a hose on the dogs and soaked half the crowd, but stopped the fight. A change of wind brought a blare of music clear and harsh down Washington Alley, and it was hailed by a concerted shout of "Here they come! Here they come!" and the perspiring police pushed the crowd back to the curb, and the wind changed again and the blare of music died away to nothing, and a hush fell on the assemblage.

"And the next time your dog jumps my dog, I'll let my dog kill him!"

"He can't do it, Jed Purvit!"

"You're a liar! You're a doggone liar!"

Smack!

The man fight between the owners of the fighting dogs, delayed but inevitable! A solid mass of humanity flowed from all the curbs, and packed in a solid circle around the man fight. A scream! The woman with the baby buggy was in the thick of it, and had to be extricated by a living wedge of policemen, while purple-faced men who had no earthly personal interest in either combatant or his quarrel, shook their fists and yelled:

"Soak him, Jed!" "Hammer him, Ben!" "Shut up or I'll bust your face!"

Hurray! The blare of music suddenly burst out again, right on them now, and over the edge of Nanny Goat Bluff came flying the bare-legged urchin, then a battalion of urchins, leaping, prancing, swarming narrow Washington Alley from wall to wall or from fence to fence; then the tall white shako of Bill Laportin, the drum major of the Fawnlake City Concert Band, then Bill himself, swinging and twirling his long silver-topped baton, throwing it high in the air and catching it without the loss of a single twirl. Six foot six was Bill Laportin, and with a two foot shako on his head he was some drum major, believe us! Say! Right in the midst of the marching he could slip that baton around him like it was a living snake, then he'd wrap himself around the baton like he was a living snake, then Bill and the baton would both twine and twirl together. How's that, huh? How's that! Right after Bill came the peerless band leader, Sylvester Simmons, with the most expensive cornet listed in the catalogues, real silver, hand-chased in a grape-vine pattern, and with a gold-plated bell! And listen, when Sylvester was tooting good and right on that cornet, he could blow a blast so shrill that for hours afterwards your ears would buzz like you'd been taking quinine! Oh he was some tooter! Then the band itself — four B-Flat cornets abreast, four altos, four slide trombones, four baritone French horns, four tubas, four snare drums and two bass drums. Some band, some band! And look at 'em march, and hear 'em blast out the inspiring strains of "America Forever, We'll Fight for Her and Die!" Sylvester Simmons' own composition, and equal to Sousa any minute, we'll say!

But oh mercy what have we here! What is this gigantic monster looming over the edge of Nanny Goat Bluff!

Why it's an elephant! A real, live elephant, swinging its trunk and lumbering along from side to side! Richly caparisoned with red embroidered cloth of gold is this majestic monarch of the jungle, and on its back a hoodah, in which reposes some magnificent potentate of the Orient! Now indeed the on-lookers bulged back to the buildings without the aid of the police as that mountainous beast waddled down Washington Alley and to the bend, while the magnificent potentate of the Orient, beaming genially on the populace, turned from curb to curb his round, pink face wreathed in smiles.

"For the love of Mike," gasped Violet Bonnie Daw, as their car was stopped in the crush at the elbow, "if it isn't your fat fool of a husband! Now where's mine?"

Not visible yet, but near by, they knew. Meantime there was no mistake about this gaudy personage on the elephant being J. Rufus Wallingford in all his flesh and in the very midst of his natural element, like a fish in a sequestered ocean nook where the sun basks on jeweled rocks! There he was in the resplendent robes of the fabled East, with a yellow turban bedecked by a glass ruby the size of a doorknob; and none in all the world could beam so well as he! Oh joy! Here was the mighty force which had set up all this mad commotion, here was the personage potent enough to jar awake this peaceful place and set it into such a surge of fevered activity; here he was, Get-Rich-Quick Wallingford, in full possession of Jimmy's town! Well, Jimmy had wanted to see his dad, and here dad was!

A hiss from Violet Bonnie interrupted Jimmy's clammy reverie, and if ever there was spite and venom on any woman's face, that woman was Violet Bonnie Daw!

"The worm!" she gasped. "The miserable crawling insect!" And, indeed, the incense-clouded float which followed the elephant carried a far-eastern fantasy of waggling palms and matting sand and poetic passion well calculated to inflame any wife who had claims to pride and pulchritude! Blackie Daw by all the powers, in a purple Mother Hubbard and a green turban! And he drank from a jug of wine, and he ate from the end of a three-foot loaf of bread, and he played to Thou a soulful Persian love ditty, not on a lute, for he had none such, but on his trusty saxophone; and at such moments the scrawny bird of paradise to whom he luted would slap him coyly on the long lean cheek, and he would give her a kittenish slap in return on the braceletted wrist, and she would titter and giggle and coquette, and show positively to the populace that there was more to this than appeared on the surface! Swathed in polychrome chiffon and tulle was "Thou," laden with many savage jewels, eyelids darkened and cheeks well-carmined; but even through the applique one could detect the hooked nose and the pinched mouth and the crow's-footed eyes of Caroline Beegoode's well-advanced spinsterhood — and she was a shrimp-faced cat if you left it to Violet Bonnie Daw, who saw no more of the parade than this, watching apoplectically the bobbing and jerking of the palms down Main Street toward the park.

"Why Jimmy! Eddie! *Jimmy!*"

None less than the Queen of the Orient was now waving frantically at them, from beneath her silken canopy atop a camel as gaily costumed as if he had stepped out of a cigarette advertisement! Fannie Wallingford did not need to be told that the beautiful queen of the Orient was

Mary Curtis. She had only to look at Jimmy's face, and at Mary's, to know the truth. Luck favored them just then, for the woman with the baby buggy had a sudden mad impulse to cross the parade, and in the very middle of the open space was seized with a panic and couldn't decide whether to go on or turn back! They had to stop the parade to extricate her, and amidst the hubbub the Queen of the Orient's well-blacked slaves and fan-bearers obligingly edged her reptilian steed over close enough to Sweet Patootie for her to bend down a blushing face and reach down a slender hand, and bid a happy "welcome home" to the Wall brothers. For the moment Jimmy Wallingford forgot the mighty potentate on the elephant, forgot everything except those emotions nearest at hand, and proudly he announced:

"This is Mary, mother!"

At the risk of her neck Fannie Wallingford climbed up on the seat to shake hands with Mary, and instantaneously, as their hands touched and they looked into each other's eyes, there sprang into them both a warm affection which is a splendid thing to exist between a mother-in-law and a daughter-in-law.

"I *am* happy to meet you!" exclaimed Mary in her soft voice, still holding the hand of Jimmy's mother.

"And I'm his Aunt Vi!" heartily announced the plump lady in the lavender motoring outfit, reaching up to claim her share of the slender hand.

"I've heard a lot about you, too," smiled Mary, happy in the quite visible approbation of Aunt Vi. "You and Mrs. Wall will come up to the house just as soon as possible, won't you, Mrs. — Mrs. —"

"Wall; Mrs. Wall!" supplied Violet Bonnie, promptly

covering the awkward pause; while Jimmy was plunged back to his clammy reverie with a splash. Wall! He had intended to do away with that name immediately on his arrival, but he had planned for a quiet corner and plenty of time to explain to Mary just why he had presented himself to her under false colors. And now —

And now the slaves of the Queen of the Orient dragged her away on her animated hobby horse of the desert, and the parade swept on; to the last grocer's wagon and the Metropolitan Opera House sandwich man advertising the "On With the Jazz" show.

Meantime, the potentate and the poet gained the bandstand ahead of the rest of the nabobs, since it was their party; and said the long lean poet to the round and beaming potentate:

"If you seat me next to my giddy old cluck again, I'll bite her! She's too damn affectionate!"

The eyes of the potentate half closed, and his round pink face reddened and his shoulders heaved.

"Tut, tut, Omar! Be a proper little Persian sport and go through with it. If thou hast aroused the tender passion in her virgin breast with thy gay youth, so much the better."

"Taunt me too far, you big stiff, and I'll smash your circumference back against your diameter!" hissed Blackie. "Why did you tell this love-starved old sparrow hawk that I was a single man?"

"Because Caroline Beegoode is the daughter of the man who controls all the money in this town," chuckled J. Rufus. "Hush, here comes the bride!"

Here she came indeed, simpering as the gallant poet took her bony hand and helped her up the steps; and then

the other orientals gathered, and the town and county packed around the bandstand, and away on the outer edge of the crowd an irate plump woman in a lavender motoring outfit began to worm her way determinedly in toward the proceedings, followed by the three other Walls. The gravest of the lot was Jimmy. In the boy there was rising a dull anger at that big mountebank up there on the bandstand, in his flaunting red robe and yellow turban. That was his father! Why had he come here — here of all places, where Jimmy was trying to answer the crook's mawkish prayer for an honest son by building a flawless future? And now Jimmy's decent work in his chosen town, and his standing with the girl he loved, must be soiled by this same father, with a gaudy scheme which could not but be a fraud with his brazen ballyhoo man at the head of it! His own father, the mountebank, but in this guise he was a stranger to Jimmy, and with suddenly straightened lips which had in them the trace of cruelty, Jimmy made up his mind to fight him as a stranger. Get-Rich-Quick Wallingford should not "pull" any crooked game in Fawnlake City! This was Jimmy's town! The crowd pressed forward as J. Rufus made ready to speak, and Jimmy pressed forward with them.

CHAPTER VIII

THE SON OF THE MOUNTEBANK

OPULENCE! That was the text of the potentate's discourse to the ladies, the gentlemen, and, might he not now call them, fellow citizens! Opulence pure and simple, rich, golden opulence, opulence for one and all within the sound of his voice, opulence so abundant and so cornucopious that it could only be expressed in the glittering gaudiness of the opulent Orient with which this grand civic demonstration had been staged! Opulence, oh ye brothers and sisters, dreamers of auriferous dreams, human moths! Opulence, otherwise wealth, otherwise riches, otherwise *money!* Oh thou greatest of all the gifts of the gods, money! By jinks, to hear this man Wallingford talk for fifteen honey-dripping minutes on no other theme whatsoever than the various ways of wording an extolment of money darned near put it in your pocket; and as his mellifluent voice rolled on and on, rising and falling in dulcet cadences, unconsciously all the men in that vast crowd were jingling the silver in their pockets, and all the ladies were nervously snapping and unsnapping their handbags; while Henry Beegoode, sitting in the bandstand behind Wallingford, all but squeezed himself shut like a crab. Money, magical money! Ah, paeans of love may thrill as may appeals to patriotism, and a touching of the tender tendrils which twine about home and fireside, kith and kin, may tingle to the heart's core; but for downright, solid, breathless, abiding interest, give us money!

A great man, this Wallingford, a smart man, a man who knew how to make you just plumb quiver! Gosh, he must be awful rich!

Money, ladies and gentlemen and fellow citizens! Look across the rippling bosom of beautiful Fawn Lake where it lies basking under the serene summer sky, every wavelet tinted with the glint of molten gold! There, on the sands also of gold, Mr. Wallingford would now rear, as if by the touch of a magic wand, a counterfeit presentment of New Bagdad. Behold! As if their heads were pivoted on one mighty neck the vast populace, with the exception of one irate woman who was working her way determinedly toward the bandstand, turned to look across the lake, and at that instant the poet Omar Blackie Daw leaped to his feet and, seizing a long megaphone, yelled through it stententoriously:

"Hoot-a-whoop-to-whooey!"

A shrill, faint answering sound came from across the lake, where an intensely bald-headed man and a ferociously whiskered one threw their weight against ropes and pulleys; and then, as J. Rufus Wallingford swept upward both fat arms, there rose from the sands, all flapping in the gathering wind then stretching taut and tight, a thriving city, blocks long; and the chief feature of its serated skyline was chimneys, factory chimneys!

"Hoot-a-whoop-to-whooey!" hoarsely yelled the poet Omar through his megophone.

Madly Onion Jones and Petrograd Pete, each at an end of New Bagdad, began running towards each other, dodging the guy ropes which were pulling and straining against the rising wind, and lighting the smoke pots which hung behind each canvas chimney! That was the touch!

A mighty cheer went up from the populace as the smoke began to curl from the automobile factory, the aeroplane factory, the furniture factory, the biscuit factory, the canning works, the meat packing concern, and all the other canvas representations of gigantic industry. Why, that rolling smoke almost made it real, as if already the wizardry of J. Rufus Wallingford had set those imaginary dynamos to whizzing and the wheels to turning in their endless, deathless, night and day grinding out of money, money, money, money! Wealth! Riches! Golden opulence for every inhabitant of Fawnlake City! Behold, ladies and gentlemen and fellow citizens! There it was, the New Bagdad, emblem and symbol and oracular oriflamme of their future prosperity! There it was, and —

Blast the thing! His voice suddenly stopped with his mouth open and his round pink face paled with consternation, for at that instant the guy ropes which had held the painted New Bagdad proudly erect snapped under the strain of the wind, and the whole town, with an end to end heaving roll like a plough furrow, fell flat on the sands, its factory chimneys still smoking! There was the emblem of their prosperity, the symbol of their future — and a laugh went up which grew and grew and circled round and round the bandstand in waves and gusts and gathered intensity and reverberated, until the park, and the whole universe, seemed one vast, hysterical roar! This while Henry Beegoode writhed in ten thousand agonies, a separate agony for each lost dollar, and the yellow turbaned potentate wiped the back of his neck and glowered up at the swiftly moving clouds which were turning the molten gold edges of the wavelets to lead. He felt a drop of rain on his nose and grabbed at the fluttering robe which

revealed his prosaic modern pants and suspenders! In that dire moment, too, the poet Daw, aghast at the sudden blight on their promising harvest, was trying to extricate his fingers from the flirtatious clutch of Caroline, curse her; in so doing he happened to turn to the near edge of the bandstand, and found his beady black eyes gazing stupidly into the viperous blue flambeaux of Violet Bonnie Daw! Oh my brothers, and amen! His countenance froze and sorrow sank deep into his soul; for Violet Bonnie loved him, fervently and fiercely, and she'd make his life a hell upon earth every time she happened to think of Caroline Beegoode, in all the years to come! With a hopeless sigh the poet Omar lay the bejewelled hand of Caroline on her lap, lay across her hand the peacock fan, and, taking up the giant megaphone, set it down over his head like an extinguisher, remaining motionless, dead to the world, but hidden, thank God, from those flaming blue eyes!

For just one instant the yellow-turbaned potentate had lost his head, and then, surveying that sea of laughing faces, he essayed a stentorian remark which no one heard; they only laughed the more. He tried another, but this time while he delivered it, he backed up, and with his heel smote his extinguished partner on the shin; a hard crack! In answer to that gentle S. O. S. the extinguished poet snapped right out and became Blackie Daw. He found J. Rufus facing the crowd and making oratorical motions with his arms while his mouth moved.

"Say Jim!" husked Blackie into Wallingford's ear.

"Beat it for the hotel!" mumbled Wallingford out of the corner of his mouth, still making oratorical motions with his arms for the benefit of the howling crowd. "Hire

the ballroom! Doll it up! Order all the sandwiches and cold stuff in the kitchen."

"Say Jim! Just turn your lamps —"

"Don't yammer, you jackass! Beat it!"

"Beat it," he did. Attempting no more to post Jim on the presence of the family, he poised on the rear edge of the bandstand long enough to gather his purple Mother Hubbard around his waist and give his long legs a chance, hopped over the rail, grabbed the four still smoking censers from the Omar Khayam float, and streaked it for the hotel; while back in the park the laughter still rose and fell and surged and reverberated.

Oh-ho-ho! There was the symbol of their prosperity, flat on the ground! There was the emblem of their opulence, flat on the ground! There was the canvas sham which had been supposed to invite their investment in Henry Beegoode's worthless sand patch, and it was flat on the ground! Ah-ha-ha-ha, ladies and gentlemen and fellow citizens! Ah-ho-ho-ho, you eager seekers after opulence! Like many another golden dream it was only a gauzy cheat, a smoking joke; and flat on the ground!

There was one spectator who was oddly touched by this accident, stirred deep down by throbbing sympathy for the stranger mountebank! With something keenly akin to pain Jimmy Wallingford realized the completeness of the disaster, realized the overwhelming defeat in that laughter which would not down; and with the shared shame of one who must look on at another's humiliation, he watched his father. Why, the yellow-turbaned potentate was now laughing *with* the crowd! His shoulders were heaving in hilarity, his eyes were half closed in mirth, and every inch of his huge broad-chested bulk and his round

pink countenance seemed to radiate genial joviality! He cracked jokes about the fall of New Bagdad! Then he made an analogy of the fact that, as flimsy emblems of things must give way to cold facts, so the disappearance of the painted New Bagdad was but a symbolism that now the dreams were dreamed, and that, on the spot where now smoked these counterfeit chimneys, there should forthwith be reared substantial structures of stone and brick which should pour forth for them all golden streams of opulence!

Agape, Jimmy Wallingford listened, saw those nearest the bandstand stop laughing by and by and pay attention, then those a little further away, in an ever widening ring; and then the boy suddenly thrilled through and through with something near to exultation as he saw that his father was getting them! No, by George, he had them! As the orator's mellifluent tones rolled on and on, rising and falling in musical cadences which again wove dreams of gold and wealth and limitless opulence, men's hands went into their pockets and jingled their coins, and women snapped and unsnapped their handbags! He had them! He had them and he held them, even though the skies darkened and the leaves of the trees flaunted up their fish-white undersides, and the wind blew chill and the rain drops began to fall! Oh, it was marvelous! It was magical, the way this mesmeric big fellow held and swayed these people; and the son of the mountebank's heart beat high and his eyes were moist. This was the first time Jimmy had ever seen his father at work, the first time he had had even a distant inkling of the warm gift his father possessed, — and Jimmy's mother, standing beside him, herself under the spell of this master emotion which her husband

was able to instill into the hearts of humanity, looked at Jimmy and at his swelling sympathy with the wizardry of his father, and her heart sank within her and her face blanched; for Jimmy was so like his father, so like!

There was a smart pattering of raindrops, and umbrellas began to go up. As one awakening from a trance Jimmy looked over at Mary, angelically sweet in her white chiffon and white roses; and she smiled at him. That smile was a stab, under the circumstances, a stab which cut deeply, for Jimmy could not, must not see her until he had talked with his father! He waved his hand to Mary, and, taking his mother's arm, began to edge out of the crowd with her, followed by Toad and Violet Bonnie; and they hurried across to the hotel where all was in an uproar. Every employee of the Splendide was scurrying hither and yon at the beck and call of Blackie Daw; for the four incense burners were already replenished and smoking away along the side walls of the big ballroom, and, at the far end of it, waiters were making a long buffet table out of a lot of little square ones; on the platform two bell boys were spreading over the speaker's table an Oriental rug from the ladies' writing room, and Blackie himself was in the musician's balcony with two porters, hanging a big Afghanistan from the rail. That looked like an excellent place for an interview, so, as the porters came down the Wall family went up, where Blackie hailed the ladies and the long lost boys with vast apparent joy, and tried to give Violet Bonnie an enthusiastic kiss of welcome; but nay, nay!

"Touch me one touch and I'll whistle for the police!" she hissed. "I never met you before! I'm Mrs. Wall!"

"Wall?" That name had a ring to Blackie so familiar

that Violet Bonnie's rage was wasted. He knew he'd have time to "square" her, and would need time; but this proposition was different. "Where do you get that Wall stuff?"

"We're the Wall brothers!" blurted Toad, his freckles black. "And that's our oil well on Curtis's place! And this is our town! Say! What are you and Daddy Jim doing here?"

"Well, I'll be — " and Horace G. Daw could get no further.

"You bet you will be!" raged Violet Bonnie. "You're a fine pair of poison pills! Do you know Jimmy has a girl in this town; a girl he wants to marry!"

"Jimmy, put it there!" exclaimed Blackie, grabbing the boy's hand in delight and patting him on the shoulder. Then he noticed a slight lack of enthusiasm on Jimmy's part, and, in fact, on the part of the entire Wall family. He scratched his head in perplexity, and brightened. Now he knew what was the matter! "Oh, about J. Rufe and me. You see he was so lonesome for Jimmy, and so cut up about what had happened, that I just had to put him to work to keep him from going dippy; but he wouldn't touch a thing unless it was upright, legitimate business. So you can bank on it that this is right!"

"What is it?" asked Fannie, reserving her opinion until she should be able to use her own ethical judgment.

"Ordinary real estate boom. We get a worthless piece of land, work up a civic pride ballyhoo, and sell 'em back their own property."

"For more than it will ever be worth," quietly commented Jimmy, his lips straight. He knew now that there was nothing he could do about this, or would do — except

tell Mary everything. He was, after all, the son of the mountebank, and could neither control his father, nor repudiate him. Each must lead his own life.

"What I want to know is this!" demanded Toad. "In a year from now, will the people in this town be glad you came here?"

"Hold on, cub." Blackie was beginning to be very uncomfortable. "If this deal of ours isn't clean commerce I'll eat it! You buy a thing for as little as you can pay for it, and sell it for as much as you can get! It's as legitimate as peddling potatoes, and what's your holler!"

Fannie's apprehensive glance at Jimmy told her nothing. Toad rasped his pompadour, and even Violet Bonnie was at a loss for an answer to this, for to her it was bible good.

"Unless you've lied about it!" she added, as a spoken conclusion to all her thought.

"I don't lie at home, and you know it!" retorted Blackie indignantly, and glancing over the rail he saw Onion Jones and Petrograd Pete come damply in and gaze wonderingly around. "I have to hustle now. You stay right where you are, and you'll have reserved seats for the party; and as soon as Jim comes and we separate these fawns from their money, we'll have a family reunion!"

"There's just one thing more!" Violet Bonnie stopped him as he was for skipping down the little spiral stairs, and she powdered her reddening nose energetically. "Who was that cat-faced shrimp?"

"Why that — er — my dear — she — "

"Don't lie to me!" his wife fairly shrieked at him, and gave him a push from the impetus of which he caught himself half way down.

There came a sudden strong blast of wind and a flurry

of raindrops, and turning to the little high windows over the musicians' balcony, the Wall family saw the yellow-turbaned potentate leading his laughing and cheering herd across the park, Henry Beegoode, in his cerise wrapper, trotting alongside the potentate and carrying a little black satchel for the money! In another instant here they came, pell mell, and thronged through the doors of the Hotel Splendide's grand ballroom, and snapped up the celery and olives and pickles in the first grand rush, and waited for more. The genuine sandalwood incense was going good by now; and my, how you could smell it! That was the trick which transformed this big bare room into a caliph's divan of truly effete luxury! Oh, it was some Oriental fete, without the shadow of a doubt; and as the populace stood on each other's toes, and sniffed the glorious incense, and waited for the buffet lunch, and craned its necks to get a good view of those rainbow clad members of the pageant who were seating themselves on the rug-covered davenports on the dais, why the populace, one and all, thrilled with the thought that this was them! It was they who were part and parcel of this great civic movement toward opulence and individual and collective plutocracy! Where, where indeed, except in Fawnlake City, could you find a gathering so representative? That was the favorite word; representative! No one stopped to question whether representative of who or what—it was enough that they were a thoroughly and absolutely representative gathering! And all they had to do was put their shoulders to the wheel, give a collective heave, and there you were! The prevailing and perfectly simple idea seemed to be that if everybody bought lots in New Bagdad and just got together and pushed, something was

bound to happen. Mr. Wallingford said so, and you only had to take one good squint at Mr. Wallingford to see what getting together and pushing had done for him! If ever any human being looked as if he had been raised on money, fed on money, slept on money, wore money and oozed money when he perspired, let alone dripping it when he talked, that man was J. Rufus Wallingford! Three cheers for Wallingford. Hurrah! Hurrah! Hurrah! Whooeee!

"And here am I," growled Petrograd Pete to Onion Jones while J. Rufus beamingly bowed; "here am I, workin' as hard as Wallingford at this game, and who pays any attention to me? Nobody! They don't know I'm on earth! I hate 'em all!" and rushing into a dark corner he began to snip fine the ends of his whiskers with a pair of pocket scissors, catching the snippings in his huge palm while his teeth gnashed and his basilisk eyes gleamed red!

And three cheers for Blackie Daw! Good old Blackie! There he was, going up on the platform to the big fellow, and while the cheers were given with a hearty will Good Old Blackie was saying to the big fellow:

"Now control your Adam's apple, Jim, because I'm going to hand you a jolt. Do you know that our lads are the oil well Wall brothers, and that Jimmy's got a girl in this town, the girl he wants to marry!"

"My God!" gasped Wallingford, great beads of perspiration popping out on his broad brow.

"Keep it on, Jim, keep it on! I told 'em this game of ours was strictly on the level, as it is, and — "

"Oh you did!" scorned J. Rufus. "Don't kid yourself! When we'd get through with these boobs they'd have just

what they had before, minus their money! I see it quick now! Tell me. Does anybody know yet that the boys are connected with us?"

"Not a soul!"

"Then it's off! We'll choke the deal, and duck and give 'em the town! Where are they?"

Up there. There was the boy, safe, sound, healthy and hearty! But as Wallingford beamed his relief and his affection to Fannie and Toad and Vi and his son, he found an expression in Jimmy's eyes which made him pause and catch his breath. There was no indignation in Jimmy, no blazing resentment, just a sense of overwhelming hurt which expressed itself in smiling quietness. There was such telepathy between father and son, since their awakening to each other, that J. Rufus felt himself trembling; and at that unpropitious instant Henry Beegoode, quivering with the birth-throes of money in his system, bustled up to Get-Rich-Quick Wallingford with:

"You know your business, of course, Mr. Wallingford, but I know this town; and I'd suggest that you wind up real quick, while they as good as have their money in their hands!"

J. Rufus pulled himself together with a jerk, and his emotion passed off in a chuckle as he looked down at Henry Beegoode; while joy was in his soul!

"It's a great idea," he admitted. "Just listen a minute, and you'll hear me wind this up so quick it'll make your head swim." Whereupon he commanded the populace to silence with a lift of his hand, and the populace hushed in an instant like an infant getting its bottle; and in that instant Petrograd Pete slipped the snippings of his whiskers into the incense!

Ah! Mr. Wallingford was speaking! Hurrah for Wallingford! But what was he saying? What! Why he was intimating that he had positive knowledge, which he could not then divulge, of a flaw in the plans for New Bagdad; he was assuring them that, as an honest promoter, he felt he should carry the risk himself for a while; he was telling them that, in consequence, there would be no New Bagdad building plots for sale at the present; and he was thanking them one and all for their enthusiasm!

A complete lull followed that announcement. They were stupefied! Why, they had supposed — Why, what was this? And during the lull, while Henry Beegoode stared and tried to readjust his mind, tried even to read in Wallingford's twinkling eyes some new trick or twist of salesmanship, an odor became apparent, an odor which was not incense. It was an odor so terrific that it strangled the breath and brought tears to the eyes. It was a horrible odor! An unbearable odor, pungent, stifling, enfeebling! It rolled through all the length and height and breadth of the grand ballroom, and the populace surged to the door, gasping and choking, its handkerchiefs to its noses! The cause of this hasty exodus fought his way out with the rest, but in his poisonous soul there was bitter rage. Twice this afternoon Petrograd Pete had failed to destroy the prospects of the opulent upper dog; once, when he had let slip the New Bagdad guy rope which he could have caught; and now, when he had wasted his whiskers in the incense, thereby helping J. Rufus to get rid of a party he himself had broken up! Pete hated everything! Meantime, smell or no smell, Henry Beegoode held the opulent upper dog at the table, and gasped:

"What does this mean? What's your idea?"

"Perfectly simple," the ex-potentate suavely returned, grabbing off his turban to protect his nose. "It's off!"

"Well, my part of it ain't off!" twanged Henry, his nose pinched shut by his gnarling fingers. "If you won't sell, I will!"

"Oh, no you won't! Our contract places the exclusive sale of this property in my hands, and not a cent is to be taken from these people!"

"Then I want my ten thousand dollars!" shrilled Henry, absent-mindedly removing his fingers from his nose to shake his fist, but replacing them in a hurry. "You'll buy that land for ten thousand dollars, out of which you cheat me by stopping this deal, or I'll sue you as soon as my lawyer can get out the papers! So help me!"

"How about him, Jim?" intoned Blackie at J. Rufus's shoulder, his nostrils pinched shut with his nose glasses. "There's a window handy, and there's a garbage wagon just below the window!"

J. Rufus contemplated Blackie sadly, as he reflected what a lawsuit might do to young Jimmy Wall's citizenship and matrimonial designs in this town.

"Blackie, old pal, this petrified porcupine is the first man who ever stung me with my consent, but I have to fall. Mr. Beegoode, I'll give you ten thousand dollars for your property tomorrow morning as soon as the bank opens."

"If I don't get it by ten o'clock you'll have a summons!" gasped Henry Beegoode as he rushed for the door; and ex-poet and ex-potentate rushed out the other door to surreptitiously hunt the Wall family, whom they dared not claim as their own, nor even openly greet.

The Wall family, however, had found their way out of

the musicians' balcony to the lobby mezzanine, and were now coming down the grand stairway. At the landing Jimmy paused. There was Mary, under the stained glass dome of the rotunda, still angelically sweet in her white chiffon and white roses, and with her were Tal and Mother Curtis and Grandma, and Caroline and Henry Beegoode, and a heavy set young man with his back turned to the stairway. They were all in excited conversation about something or other, the break up of the land boom no doubt, but that amusing speculation didn't interest Jimmy. He was too much occupied with the strange young man! Who was he? What right had he to hold Mary so intimately by the arm while he talked! What right had he to lean down so close to her? The big stiff! Hot jealousy burned in Jimmy, and out of that acid-sharp emotion came the necessity of seeing Mary right away. He had a lot of things to tell her, important things, and they wouldn't keep! He excused himself, raced down the stairs with a nod to his father and Blackie who rounded the newel post just then, and hurried straight for Mary. He was within eight feet of his goal and full in the range of Mary's smiling welcome when suddenly there rushed upon him a lean, lanky, loose-jointed young woman with a cerise hat, a green sport's jacket, and an abnormally short plaid skirt which revealed her calves in all their straight severity; and she screamed with delight:

"Why Snookums, old kid! How lucky is your little Evelyn! The show's broke and so am I, darling! Dig!" Whereupon she wrapped her snakelike arms around "Snookums" and gave him a hearty smack, then rattled on about how she had to get back to New York, and if her old pal Jimmy was headed that way he could buy an

extra ticket; if not, he could have over the cash — and there were the lollypops also! Suddenly Lanks stopped her jabber, struck by the stupefaction in Jimmy, and following his numb gaze she saw standing there a pretty girl so pallid that she seemed all of a piece with her white chiffon and white roses, except for her dark eyes wide with horror; and panic clutched at the heart of the ungainly Lanks, for she had a more tender regard for Jimmy than he would ever know.

"What have I done!" she whispered. "Jimmy! What have I done!" but Jimmy did not hear her, did not know that she had stepped back from him; the strange young man had turned. It was "Doc Blinkers!" It was the medical student who had warned the son of Get-Rich-Quick Wallingford to watch out for his lobeless ear!

Too late now for Jimmy to make a confession to Mary; "Blinkers," Henry Beegoode's son, told it all, his nose hooked down and an ugly snarl on his lips. And those who loved Jimmy had to stand by, helpless, and watch him take this bitter lashing with never a physical wince, though his face was set and his lips quivered in the deadly hurt of it; for he was unable to offer a word in his own defense — it was all true.

"Mary!" Toad confronted her as Tal patted her hand, and Toad's honest face was aglow with loyalty. "Jimmy was on his way to tell you all about it, to explain everything!"

Slowly Mary Curtis found herself amid the wreckage of her humiliated love, and it was a very straight-necked and a very stiff little Mary who looked coldly at Toad.

"With more lies? He came here under an assumed name, didn't he; won my friendship under an assumed decent

character, tricked my father out of his land! Explain? What could the son of Get-Rich-Quick Wallingford explain!"

Jimmy did not move, did not even flinch when Mary turned her cold glance on him, nor when the Curtis family, once his friends, ignored him as they started to go. Toad took a step forward, as if he would follow them to make one more appeal.

"It's no use, Toad," Jimmy said quietly, and he could have held himself in that dead poise, alone in a dreary universe which had no sun or sky, except that just then a soft hand was laid on his arm and Jimmy's mother stood beside him, the anguish of understanding in her eyes; and then the ice melted in Jimmy's heart, and tears came, and he wasn't a man — he was just a boy!

CHAPTER IX

FORWARD THE LOLLYPOPS!

MARY CURTIS did not know that the way was long, nor the hill steep, as the silent family trudged up Main Street, amid the excited throng all agog with the sensation of Get-Rich-Quick Wallingford, the Wall brothers — and Mary! No pallor now on little Mary's face, no pallor on her lips, for the neighbors with their pity had awakened her to her shame. Mary had her pride from the Curtises, a pride worn comfortably because it could never be brought into question; but she also had something of Emily Curtis, once Bozzleweed, who walked on so rigidly ahead there, with unbending angularity and her lips firmly compressed; and it was that which made Mary's neck so straight and set her chin so high, and so stiffened her anger as they neared the Curtis home.

There was the derrick, looming its ugly head above the trees in the hollow, symbol of the crude marring which had come into the otherwise graceful landscape of her existence. How she hated the thing! It must come down, and the lumber be carted away or burned, so that in her walks about the place she should never stumble on a stick of it by accident, to remind her of her shame! It must come down, and the scar be filled with fresh earth, and underbrush grown there! No pallor in her cheeks as she looked at that ugly thing, no pallor on her lips, no despairing dullness in her eyes; they were bright, shining, glittering! And here was the gate, over-arched by the flaunt-

ing trumpet vine. Her cheeks flamed. That was where she had stood when she had flirted with Jimmy, the son of Get-Rich Quick Wallingford, "Snookums," the chorus girl's pet; and almost a shrill shriek escaped her as she came to this phrase in her angry self-revilement. Up the hill yonder, and visible through the high pillared perspective of the portico, was the big rock where she had kissed him, unasked! Oh ye flaunting trumpet vines, oh ye flamboyant peonies and ye dark red roses, how pale your colors as contrasted with the crimson hue in little Mary's cheeks! What must he think of her, this gay young roisterer of the city, who had spent his careless time with girls among whom kisses were cheap! Another startling thought came out of that, a thought which gave her a bit of pallor again and a grip at her heart. How many girls had pressed their warm lips against his, how many girls had his arm encircled and drawn strongly closer? Suddenly this girl of wholesome ancestors and high ideals felt soiled, degraded, common by having grouped herself with these others, and unconsciously she rubbed her lips with the back of her hand, rubbed them harshly, roughly, as if by that she could have taken off the contamination of the kiss which had lingered there, a sweetly quivering thing, these whole two weeks. In the nights she had felt the tingle of that kiss, and now she hated him for it! Snookums, the chorus girl's pet! Why wasn't it possible that bad people should show their badness in their faces, so that decent folk might take warning and stay away? Then up rose before her thought the face of young Jimmy, a smooth oval face with smiling lips and gentle eyes; rose before her the tall form of Jimmy, with its easy poise and muscular grace, and a sharp pain was in Mary's heart and a knowl-

edge which sickened her; that throughout her, from head to foot, she had been in sympathy with the tall Jimmy; and she hated him for it; hated him! And in her something mourned.

The caste of a family is shown by when it begins its arguments after a public humiliation. Those of primitive layer begin their quarrel where they are; those a stratum above begin it as soon as they are outside; others as soon as they come in sight of home; and the more reserved wait until they are behind their own doors. Such last were the Curtises. Except for Grandma's constantly quavered, "My, my! I can't seem to believe it! My, my!", no one spoke a word until they had entered the house and thrown up the blinds and opened the windows, and disposed of their hats and various impedimenta, and selected their favorite places in the corner of the portico, where Tal, his mind distressed by the face of Mary whom he had covertly watched all the way up the hill, said:

"Well, well, I'll declare, if this hasn't been a day!"

Absolutely nothing ensued on this remark, except that Emily Curtis cast a marblized eye briefly in his direction, and folded her thin hands lengthwise in her lap, one on the other. Tal mopped his brow and rumpled the curls at the back of his neck, as if that might give him some idea for fixing matters which seemed in such crying need of fixing. Mary sat on the porch rail, motionless, staring up over the hill toward the top of the ugly derrick.

"You know, maybe after all we're wrong," Tal ventured bye and bye, being careful to speak to no one in particular. "Maybe we should have given Jimmy a chance to explain; maybe he could have shown us a good, straight, honest reason for everything he's done. Maybe — "

"Tal!" The voice of Emily Curtis was as stiff and rigid as her backbone, and Tal visibly wilted. "I should think you'd consider your family before you defend those young criminals! All the town knows that we have been associating with swindlers and thieves! Mary has been made ridiculous for life!" A slight movement from Mary, but she did not turn, as her mother went on with rising voice and growing aggravation. Emily Curtis's wrath was one of those which grows by what it feeds on, and was usually a crescendo affair. "All Fawnlake City knows that Mary was as good as engaged to young Wall — Wallingford! — or ought to be, and she has that to thank you for!"

"Oh, well, now mother, see here!" broke in Tal, rubbing the curls at the nape of his neck most vigorously.

"Talbot!" This was worse than "Tal," more severe. "The less you say the better. It's your easy-going weakness that got us into this! You brought those strangers off the road into your family, you jumped head foremost into their swindling trap, and now we've lost our land!"

"My, my, I just can't seem to believe it!" quavered grandma, rocking to and fro in her little rocker; "My, my!" but no one paid any attention to her.

"It isn't father's fault," said Mary, very evenly, without turning her head. "You mustn't blame him for it. It was my fault, altogether mine!"

"Why, Honey!" Tal couldn't bear to see that bitterness in his little Mary. "You mustn't say that! Lord knows you didn't do anything you oughtn't to have done, honey. They asked you for some water for their engine, and you gave it to them; then I came along and talked with the

boys, and kind o' took a fancy to them, and — well, your daddy's pretty easy, I guess, and let them talk him into anything they wanted to, because they seemed such nice, bright, honest young fellows, and do yet, as far as that's concerned." The smile was coming back on Tal's infantile countenance as he talked himself into a state of comfortableness, which everybody should share if they'd look at things rightly. "And I really believe, Honey, if we gave them a chance to explain — "

"Talbot Curtis, I've heard the last word!" and Emily rose sharply. "There will be no more excuses, there will be no more talk of explanations, there will be no more humiliations for this family! I want that oil well stopped, and our land given back to us, and I don't want anything else. I won't *have* anything else!" Thereupon Emily Curtis stalked into the house, and from the kitchen there came vigorous sounds indicative of a supper, which, whatever else it should comprise, would not be seasoned with the savor of good cheer.

"My, my!" quavered Grandma. "It does seem that you can't stay happy no matter how willing you are. Mary, you thought a mighty sight of Jimmy, didn't you?"

Mary's answer to that unexpected twang at the harp-strings of her soul was to angrily dash away a tear which had sprung to her eye, and her teeth set in a rage born of the humiliating truth.

"Well, so did I, Mary, so did I," quavered Grandma, distressed with the world. "Don't be foolish, Mary darling. I've lived long enough to know that your heart will give you more peace than your pride. Why, I couldn't be mad at Jimmy, even now; and if he came around with

Sweet Patootie and asked me to take a ride, I declare I'd go."

An explosive laugh came on this, and it came from Mary. She laughed and she laughed, dropping her arms by her sides limply, and Tal beamed with delight at this change in Honey, until bye and bye the laughter had a queer sound, and he hurried over to her; and she came into his arms and sobbed until she stopped from exhaustion, while he smoothed and smoothed at her pretty brown hair, and called her his baby! Grandma looking on in deep approval, for Tal had always been such a comfort to her, decided on just the delicate moment when Mary might be better off alone, and took her son into the house.

The wisdom of the aged only comes with age, and youth cannot absorb it. The things which had changed little Mary still existed. There was the ugly derrick, reminding her of the swindle she had brought on them, there was the trumpet-vined gateway to remind her of her "flirtation," there was the big rock on the hill where she had kissed him, *unasked!* Round and round she came to that kiss, and every time she came to it the hot blood of shame flamed in her cheeks, and her hands gripped; and in the years to come shame would overtake her when she thought of it. She had thrown herself at him, had been bold, had been forward, had exposed herself to whatever he might choose to think of her, and she hated him for it.

Suddenly into her turgid reverie there broke a babble of voices, feminine voices, and turning swiftly toward the gate she beheld six of the seven lollypops flocking through, in a kaleidoscope of colors which made the grand oriental pageant seem like a faded dream. Mary's first instinct

was for flight, but something held her there, red eyes and all; she was too proud to run away, with Lanks hurrying up the walk and calling:

"Miss Curtis! Oh Miss Curtis!"

Mary even faced them, especially Lanks; and let them see her red eyes; and took their sympathy standing straight and stiff, but very small alongside the huge portico pillar. They had a purpose, however, far more businesslike than sympathy, as was clearly evident in them.

"I hope you'll excuse us for intruding, Miss Curtis," said Lanks, with unusual seriousness as she considered how very pretty Jimmy's girl was; while the actress in the other girls took careful note of Mary's poise and understudied everything she did. She was real gentlefolks. The seventh lollypop, Maria Theresa Plomps, turned in at the gate puffing and gasping for breath, and, expending her last ounce of energy in a rush for the portico, dropped in the big armchair and began fanning herself. The McCabe sisters, in lemon and orange today, sat side by side at one end of the broad porch settle, and Cleo Patra sank languidly in the other end and disposed herself in crimson voluptuousness. Shimmie Devere flung herself on the steps with all the abandon of a boy; and Florodora Sexton chose Mother Curtis's straight backed chair and sat picturesquely posed with her hands atop the long handle of her parasol. Lanks remained standing. "We think it's only right to tell you," she went on with some difficulty, "that you probably have Jimmy Wallingford all wrong."

"I'll say she has!" seconded Shimmie Devere vigorously, a trace of resentment in the glance she cast at Mary. "Snookums is an all right kid, about the best there is,

and I wouldn't be afraid to let him take my little sister to a wine supper, if I had a little sister."

Mary's level eyes turned only a moment to Shimmie, and then they turned away. She waited for Lanks; Lanks was the one she felt.

"Jimmy and Ed have been good pals to all of us," went on Lanks quietly. "I heard that his father was in town, we girls were broke, and I went there to introduce myself to Mr. Wallingford, knowing that he would help us to get back to New York, for he is a very generous man." Mary's expression plainly conveyed that this didn't matter, and Lanks paused for a moment. She felt an indefinable antagonism between them, and the instant she was aware of it she smiled at Mary ingratiatingly. "Then I saw Jimmy in the lobby, and — well you'll never know what it means to lay eyes unexpectedly like that on an old friend, because you'll never be broke in a strange town."

"So what does she do," burst in Maria Theresa Plomps, "but rush up to old friend, wrap a wing around him, buss him a kiss, and touch him for carfare — and take it from me, sister, he don't think any more of Lanks than he does of any of us!"

"Right," agreed Lanks; and she smiled; cheerfully.

"Let me tell you the facts," drawled a sibilant voice. Cleo Patra, holding her willowy languor superbly. "Your sweet friend, the gentleman with the sidewhiskers, did a neat bit of meowing, down at the hotel. A couple of months ago he butted into a crowd which didn't know he was on earth, and without an excuse called Jimmy the son of a crook, and handed him a slam about his lobeless ear; and before Jimmy could do anything about it, my pet friend, Spots, gave him a flat nose."

"And it was a lovely piece of work!" added Maria Theresa Plomps with sturdy enthusiasm.

"We were all seven there, Miss Curtis, and saw it," corroborated Dottie McCabe; and since Mary seemed unimpressed, Lottie added: "That's why we all seven of us came up, after Lanks, Miss Anderson, I mean, told us what had happened. We all want you to know the truth about Jimmy!"

"So you see, Miss Curtis," resumed Cleo the vamp, "when your friend with the side whiskers saw Jimmy today and knew that he was a — a friend of yours, why that was the chance to get even; and if a girl pulled the kind of play Blinkers Beegoode did, everybody'd say how catty women are!"

"I beg your pardon!" broke in a pedantic voice, and they all turned to find Dr. Bertram Beegoode standing on the portico steps. It was wonderful to see the glare of masculine severity with which Dr. Bertram Beegoode, conscious of his own impeccable rectitude, surveyed those moral lepers, the seven lollypops; equally wonderful to see the instantaneous and unanimous venom with which they returned his glare and watched him cross to take the hand of Jimmy's girl! "Mary," said he, "I have my side of that story to relate. Young Wallingford was corrupting the freshmen of my college, and — "

"It's quite all right, Bert," interrupted Mary, and this was the first word she had spoken. "I don't need any defense for you. I have known you for years, and have known you always to be a gentleman."

"Gentleman!" flared Cleo, losing for the moment her languid poise, and stiffening from her willowy vampiness. "Well, where we come from, gentlemen don't insult ladies!"

"Which he sure did!" vociferated Plomps. "Then Snookums called Blinkers, and Blinkers opened up on Snookums, and Spots smashed Blinkers! We're honest girls working for a living, we are, and your side-sluggered friend called us questionable characters, meaning — "

"Don't get rough, Plomps!" piped the babylike voice of Florodora.

Again Mary stopped Dr. Bertram Beegoode with a tightening of her clasp on his arm, as he filled his lungs for an indignant dissertation on his views of virtue and their views of vice, or perhaps his views of vice and their views of virtue.

"I think I have heard all that young Mr. Wallingford sent you to tell me." Mary now turned fully on Lanks, and thereby stopped the impetuous denial which she had felt, rather than seen, welling up in that angular person — for Jimmy hadn't sent them! "Your errand is wasted, for I am not interested in anything concerning him. He and his friends look at right and wrong so differently from Dr. Beegoode and myself and our frends, that we could not have anything in common. You may tell him that, if you like. Will you come into the house, Bert?"

The lollypops had risen in a row, and Florodora laid a restraining hand on Plomps whose elbows were squared as if for action. The rest remembered that they were ladies, and that there was but one thing to do, not be found on the portico when the door closed! They were stopped by a parting shot from "Blinkers."

"And if you want to carry a message to young Wallingford from me," he stated with the severity of a Puritan father, "you may tell him that the sooner he leaves this town, the better."

"All right, dearie!" yelled Plomps, half way down the path. "And here's a little message from me to you. Go to hell!" Grabbing up a clod from beneath the lilac bush, she slammed it in his general direction so vigorously that it splattered against the screen door, and cast a cloud of dust over all that part of the portico.

Feeling that they had done their best for Jimmy, the seven lollypops then "beat it" for the Hotel Splendide, where they bulged into the sumptuous third floor front suite, relieving a silence which had been painful. Words had not seemed to fit the tragedy which had fallen on Jimmy! With seven voices the lollypops explained, while being introduced, just where they had been, and what they had been trying to do and what they had done, and not — relating everything circumstantially, except the message of Plomps.

"So Jimmy boy, I'm afraid it's a frost," confessed Lanks, putting her hand on his shoulder as he sat in the window looking out over the park, and gazing down at him so compassionately that Fannie Wallingford, watching this as she watched everything which concerned Jimmy, divined something which Lanks did not intend to reveal. "I can't tell you how sorry I am, old kid, but it looks to me like this town's spoiled for you."

Jimmy didn't answer, but looked motionlessly out across the park. His recent fellow citizens were scurrying to and fro down there, and the birds were flitting from bough to bough, piping up in their clear voices about how fresh and beautiful the world was since the rain had stopped, and the chimney tops of New Bagdad over there on the sand were still smouldering and casting up their black smoke to dirty Jimmy's whole horizon. Fannie

Wallingford unclasped her hands, and clasped them again. J. Rufus looked at Jimmy, troubled. He felt, and correctly, that any word of advice from him, at this juncture, wouldn't sound right, could be picked to pieces and turned inside out, and reflected back against him with a dull sickening thud.

"And all the wreck was wrought by a puerile party with sideburns!" suddenly blazed Violet Bonnie Daw. "I couldn't write a book full of scientific splush about the different parts of the human map, but if I know anything about faces, as I studied 'em on Broadway and back stage, I'd say that husky side-whiskered simp could be made the fall guy for any kind of disgrace that'd look exciting in the papers — and he's got lobes on his ears at that!"

Two people suddenly looked up at Vi; they were father and son; and on the round pink face of the one, and on the oval pink face of the other, there came the musing twitch of a smile, in the eyes of both a studious light which presently grew into a sparkle. There was something exhilarating now in the look which passed between father and son, something like a tonic in the quickness of intellect with which each mind understood the other; and Blackie Daw smoothed at his pointed mustaches with cat-like precision, grinning contentedly.

CHAPTER X

BUSINESS IS BUSINESS

PROMPTLY at nine A.M., Messrs. Wallingford and Daw emerged from the wide portals of the Hotel Splendide, and presented themselves to the quivering inspection of downtown Fawnlake City. In all the world there was no topic, which, on this next day after the grand Oriental fizzle, so interested and agitated Fawnlake City as the topic of Messrs. Wallingford and Daw! There they were, the tall broad fellow and the tall lean fellow, side by side, in even step, their silk hats and their patent leather shoes glistening in the sun, and them resplendent from head to foot in the best of tailoring and the best of haberdashery, and the best of everything. Rascals! That's what they were. Crooks! Grafters! Fawnlake City didn't exactly understand what had happened, but it had a vague impression that somehow or other the town had been providentially saved from some vast devastating swindle, which would have pauperized them all. Terrible people, Messrs. Wallingford and Daw, people to shun, people to despise; and people to excite marvel by their brazen effrontery. Why, they hadn't even left town yet! If they didn't go pretty soon they should be run out! Gray-whiskered Dan Ayers, always loafing in front of his cigar store, was just thinking this when the two smooth frauds turned in his direction, and the round pink face of J. Rufus brightened at sight of Dan, and Blackie grinned and gave the high sign of the grand United Order of Kidders, which

consisted of placing the thumbs to both ears and waving the palms of both hands in imitation of jackass; and to save himself Dan couldn't resist a smile of friendly greeting and a hearty "Good-morning boys." Doggone 'em, why were they so pleasant and likeable! The same reflection occurred to more than one as the sleekly plumaged birds of prey crossed Main Street and entered the Fawnlake Bank.

Ten thousand dollars? In bills of large denomination? Certainly, Mr. Wallingford. The honest old paying teller in the threadbare coat bowed obsequiously, with the dull wonder which sometimes seized him as to whether integrity would really be paid for as richly in the next world as Henry Beegoode promised; and he took Mr. Wallingford's letter of credit in to the president of the bank for O. K. Perfectly good, that letter of credit. The president had satisfied his mind about it a couple of weeks ago, but nevertheless he came right out of the private office with the parchment in his hand, and his nose unusually hooked and the crow's feet unusually deep around his eyes, for he was going to get money this morning, was Henry!

"I judge from the amount that this is for the purchase of that property," he observed peering up at the huge J. Rufus eagerly, and there was moisture in the corners of his lips. His pinched eyes rested on a surly countenance, on two surly countenances; gone was the beam of J. Rufus, gone the grin of Blackie; they were for all the world like two wrongdoers driven into a corner, and trying to brazen it out with sullen defiance; wherein Henry found pleasure, him being righteous. A grudging nod, with not even an accompanying grunt from the broad-chested big fellow confirmed Henry's guess about the money, and he then

suggested: "Your check will do just as well, Mr. Wallingford, and also I have Mr. Terwixter in my office now, if you'd like to conclude the transaction at once."

Sulky defiance was right. That was the entire spirit animating Messrs. Wallingford and Daw this morning, and Henry enjoyed himself quite well as the big culprit growled:

"I'll have nothing more to do with your lawyer! He drew up the contract that's costing me ten thousand dollars. What you'll do, Beegoode, is this. You'll come over to my hotel with me and take your pay in cash, and give me a straightforward bill of sale which I'll write myself, or you don't get my ten thousand!"

"It isn't regular," objected Mr. Beegoode. "I'm only proposing the lawyer and the usual legal forms for your protection, Mr. Wallingford; though of course, so long as I get the ten thousand dollars, I don't mind walking across the street. I'll fetch my hat.

"And another thing!" snapped J. Rufus. "I don't want this hold-up snickered about until I can get my family out of town, so bring along a witness you can trust to keep his mouth shut!"

It might have been noticed by a shrewd on-looker that into the eyes of both Mr. Wallingford and Mr. Daw there came a sort of waiting expression after this demand, then the waiting expression gave way to one of satisfaction as Henry Beegoode's frowning face was lightened by a perfectly normal conclusion:

"I'll bring my son Bert. He's right back in the office."

The cornered culprits affected to take the suggestion of Dr. Bertram Beegoode most unpleasantly. As a matter of fact, however, before they had started from the hotel

they had seen Dr. Bertram Beegoode come down from his new professional suite above the bank, and enter his father's office by the side door. If they had not seen this, they would have waited, for they needed "Blinkers"; and so presently the Beegoodes, father and son, followed the thwarted crooks across to the Splendide and up into the luxurious headquarters established for crookedness in one of the rooms of the third floor front suite, the room with the Dolly Varden wall paper. Here J. Rufus sat at his glass-topped mahogany desk, and motioned his oppressors into easy chairs, and laid the ten thousand dollars cash in a neat pile in plain sight, and drew a pad of paper towards him, and felt for a fountain pen. Alas, he had no fountain pen! He asked Mr. Daw for a fountain pen! Alas, Mr. Daw had no fountain pen! Much annoyed at having to accept a favor from his extortioner, he asked Henry for a fountain pen; and so nervous was he, as one brought thus to bay should be, that he jabbed Henry's pen into the paper and bent the points!

"Damn!" he exploded with great naturalness. He tore off the top sheet of the pad and threw it away. One sheet gone. "I'm very sorry, Mr. Beegoode." He turned to the son of the extortioner. "Have you a fountain pen?" Dr. Bertram had, and he produced it austerely; austerely indeed, this morning, for his shingle was out and he was a regular professional man, dressed gloomily for the part, mutton chop whiskers and all. Mr. Wallingford was in a terrible state of funk over his ignominious defeat, for this pen also he jabbed into the paper and the pen point broke! The second sheet gone, and all the fountain pens out of the way.

"If you had let my lawyer fix this up, as I wanted you

to, you wouldn't have two fountain pens to pay for," snapped Henry, who began to feel that he was losing interest on that pile of one thousand dollar bills which lay so temptingly before him.

"Will this do, Mr. Wallingford?" inquired Mr. Daw respectfully, and he produced a gold-mounted pencil.

Mr. Wallingford shook his head at it, but young Dr. Beegoode said sharply:

"It will do as well as ink."

"Good in any court," snapped Henry. "Write your bill of sale."

"Better anyway," suddenly decided Wallingford as with a bright idea. "With a pencil I can take a carbon of it, and the two copies will be identical." He took from a drawer a carbon sheet, interposed the carbon between the third and the fourth sheets of his big writing pad, rapidly wrote the bill of sale and offered it for signature. Nose-glasses held to his eyes and paper in hand, Henry Beegoode scanned every comma and period of that bill of sale, then appended his signature with the pencil. It was a hard pencil and he had to press firmly to make a mark. Young Dr. Beegoode inspected the document by period and by comma, and appended his signature as a witness. Mr. Horace G. Daw, twirling his sharply pointed mustaches so that they drooped straight down and were forlornly ragged, inspected that paper by period and comma, and appended *his* signature as a witness. Then Mr. Wallingford handed over the money, and while the side-burned Henry Beegoode greedily counted it under the equally greedy surveillance of the equally side-burned Dr. Bertram Beegoode, both hook-nosed and crow's-footed, Mr. Wallingford folded, right on the pad, the two copies of the

bill of sale legal fashion, and folded with them *the next blank sheet, which was number five from the top of the pad!*

"Here's your copy," gruffly proferred J. Rufus; then slipping from the inside of the packet the two copies together, *both the original and the carbon of the bill of sale, he handed them, as if they were one paper, to Henry Beegoode*, and at the same time he placed sheet number five, the blank page folded like the others, in his breast pocket.

Without much care Henry Beegoode put his copy of the bill of sale in his long pocket book. It had little value to him. Wallingford was the one to whom the document meant something. The money was the only thing of interest or value to Henry, and as he tucked that carefully away, he observed:

"Well Mr. Wallingford, leaving ten thousand dollars in a town, in place of taking money out, ought to be a lesson to you — he, he, he!"

"He, he, he," echoed young Dr. Beegoode. "And I suppose you and your family will be going elsewhere as rapidly as possible."

"Well, no," returned Mr. Wallingford, with such a sudden dropping of his nervous funk, and such a sudden resumption of his twinkling-eyed suavity, that Henry Beegoode, also Doc, stared at him, perplexed. "I'm not going to leave town. I intend to remain here; with my family."

Henry and Doc cast glances at each other; slow, lingering glances.

"You're — you're going to remain!" repeated Henry, incredulously. "After all that's happened?" and he was annoyed to observe that Blackie Daw, who had now twisted his mustaches straight up, was lightly fingering

the keys of his saxophone, and humming a playful air as if making sure of the notes he would presently toot.

"Why, yes, Mr. Beegoode, in spite of all that or which has happened," returned J. Rufus, his eyes half closing now and his round pink face wreathed in a smile, while his chest and his broad shoulders heaved a silent chuckle. "I'm going to stay here, for the same reason that yesterday I refused to sell any share of that New Bagdad site; which, as you may soon have occasion to remember, was at that time part yours; he! he! he!" and allowing his chuckle to come forth, jovially and genially and freely, he significantly tapped the breast pocket where he had put his supposed copy of the bill of sale, led the way to the door, opened it and bowed out his visitors with various thoughts struggling in them, startled thoughts, thoughts unpleasant to men who loved money. Already Henry Beegoode began to fear that he had made a mistake!

"You'd better not pull any hocus-pocus on me, Get-Rich-Quick Wallingford!" he warned, and then the door was closed; from the inside. From the inside also, there came a disquieting dual peal of laughter.

"Now if they don't find that they have both copies before they get on the street we're safe," speculated J. Rufus. "Where's that hot water, Blackie, and the fish platter?"

From the bath room Blackie brought the platter full of hot water, and in a moment more their sheet of blank paper was face downward in the dish. A long time they bent over it, and then they breathed mutual signs of relief as through the wet paper they could see the violet letters slowly taking form. Sheet five from the top of the pad; the chemically treated sheet, and now a copy of that

bill of sale, as enduring as the paper itself; complete; signatures of witnesses, and all!

"Lobes on their ears, eh?" commented J. Rufus with savage vindictiveness, "nice, pretty well-formed lobes!" He watched the completion of the chemical miracle, and frowned. "There's one thing we hadn't thought of, Blackie. Now that we have the blasted desert, how do we make Henry wish he had it back?"

"That's up to you, Jim," grinned Blackie. "Any fool can grab an opportunity, but a wise guy makes 'em."

They were interrupted by a loud "clucking" out in front, as if a particularly active barnyard had been moved into Main Street, and J. Rufus grabbed his hat.

"The chicks are flocking to the chicken farm," he guessed. "Far be it from me to stay out of any party which can laugh."

Down at the curb stood Sweet Patootie and the hotel bus, and into the latter were thronging the seven lollypops when Blackie sprang among them. It was Cleo the vamp who captured Toad and added him to the bus party, and as they rolled away with Jimmy and J. Rufus and Fannie and Violet Bonnie following in Sweet Patootie, downtown Fawnlake City once more quivered with thrills. At last the hordes of vice and the minions of evil were on their way! Fawnlake City was to be rid of their presence, to be surged, to be clean!

Something was the matter, however. They were not going downcast, as they should in defeat, but gaily, even as conquering heroes, and *singing on their way!* And say, something else was wrong! They didn't turn off at Washington Street for the depot, and they didn't turn off at Hamilton Street nor Tyler Street! B' jinks, they weren't

going to the station at all! They were going right up Main Street, insulting that respectable thoroughfare with shouting and laughter and such ungodly ditties as "How Dry I Am" and "We Want More Lager Beer" and "Where's Your Father, Mine's in Jail"! Scandalous! Perfectly scandalous; but George Prince the best dressed young man in town, and better known as Prince George Prince, and Sam Hecket, the leading "sport" of the city, and Frank Gippert, the swift-moving son of Gippert & Son, Boots and Shoes, and gray-whiskered Dan Ayers, and a lot more reflected that they were a fine and dandy lot of lookers! From the windows of his offices above the bank Dr. Bertram Beegoode watched them pass, and his nose hooked down and his lip snarled, for through and through him Doc did despise the unrighteous and the frivolous, them and all their ways. They were corrupters of the world! Caroline Beegoode, sister of Bertram, eldest child of Henry, was on her lawn snipping roses when the ribald roisterers came by, now singing "Hail, Hail, The Gang's All Here," and as Blackie Daw audaciously blew Caroline a kiss, she snipped her finger in place of a rose, and threw down her shears in a rage, and, dashing straight into the house, took a dose of bitters to ward off a bilious attack. She was poisoned for life, was Caroline, and Horace G. Daw had better never sit at her feast if she were Queen of Egypt! On up the hill they rolled, and turned with a wide circle in front of the Curtis gate with its over-arching trumpet vines, and stopped at Mrs. Waite's across the road, and startled into giddy foolishness the staid and respectable old echo which dwelt in the Curtis hills. Mrs. Waite and her spinster sisters-in-law, Patience and Prudence, afraid and yet thrilled over the splendid bargain

they had made last night with Mrs. Daw and Mrs. Wallingford, came hurrying out to greet them and the young ladies who were to be "rested"; then down tumbled the lollypops from the bus, helter-skelter, with such a reckless display of lingerie and hosiery and garters and bare knees as made the Waites, particularly the Misses Waites, gasp so violently that never again would they have the normal control of their lungs. Into the house the chicks rushed, and there was a great bustle and flurry of taking in luggage and sorting it; and all the blinds of the second story windows popped up, and out of all the windows popped heads with hair curly and wavy and straight, black, red, yellow and brown, and head yelled to head, and laughter such as the rambling old Waite house had never known resounded through it.

Life, vigorous, bounding life had come up on the hill where the Gander family crossed, and the tang of it might have gripped any one who watched; but not little Mary Curtis, leaning against the big pillar on the side portico, concealed amid the honeysuckles. What did it mean? Something unpleasant and aimed at her, she was sure. How could the Wallingfords and the Daws be so brazen after their exposure? How could they carry themselves with such cheerful effrontery? How could they be so apparently happy in bringing those young women up here, across from her home! Hadn't they done enough? Hadn't Jimmy — She stopped herself abruptly. There were no tears in Mary now, she had shed them all during the night; but where she leaned against the big pillar, the honeysuckles trembled.

The party on the other side of the road ignored the Curtis place, except for Toad who looked over constantly,

rasping his stubborn hair. Jimmy came out of the house, where he had escorted his mother and Aunt Vi, and as he joined his father and Blackie and Toad in Sweet Patootie, out of the various windows there welled a chorus of affectionate goodbyes to "Snookums," also "Spots" and "Pops" and "Legs," which last was the name most in favor for B. Daw. Then Sweet Patootie trundled down to the corner and through the gap which had been made for it in the Curtis fence, and wound round the hill to the oil well, the Big Hope!

"The Big Hope" chuckled J. Rufus, and slapped Jimmy on the shoulder to ease the sting of that taunting reminder.

"All right, kid, if you want to, but there's oil down there!" flared Toad indignantly, his freckles beginning to glow.

"Maybe, maybe," grinned Blackie, looking into the little round black hole, a solid cylinder of emptiness one thousand feet down. "Maybe, maybe, maybe. And dust down there no doubt, and chunks of rock, and bugs and other things."

Both young oil prospectors disdained any further technical conversation and clattered into their tent to pack for moving back to the expensive Splendide while Blackie amused himself by dropping the drill and winding it up again with prodigious effort, and Jimmy's father sank into troubled thought. The boy's acumen in forming this company, with the railroad joker in it, was entirely too professional to put at ease one who knew that profession all too thoroughly!

The boys had finished their packing when the resident stockholders of The Big Hope Oil Company marched solemnly up the hill in the wake of their natural leader,

Talbot Curtis. Talbot was forcibly fortified with honest indignation that these smooth strangers should have tried to make a dupe of him, and when he came upon the four of them clustered near the unproductive hole in the ground, he walked straight over to them and said:

"Well, well, I declare, here you all are, together! Good morning gentlemen."

"Hello Tal!" Toad turned swiftly and gripped his hand like a long lost brother; while Tal felt the piercing eyes of Ma Curtis boring into the back of his neck. He cleared his throat. This hadn't been at all the sort of a start he had expected to make, which, in fact, he'd have to make. He screwed up his entire determination, and avoiding the beaming eye of J. Rufus and the friendly grin of Blackie Daw, he took a firm grip of the lapel of his pongee coat and said, not to anybody in particular, but just generally:

"Gentlemen, I'm sorry to say that we are compelled to ask for a dissolution of the corporation heretofore comprised of my family and young misters — misters —" He trailed off in confusion, while he debated whether to use the new names or the old ones of Jimmy and Toad.

"Business is business, Mr. Curtis," Jimmy's quiet gaze swept straight past the pallidly silent Mary, and rested on Tal with the impersonal directness of a commercial man. "We have a perfectly valid agreement as to this enterprise, and a properly organized company legally sanctioned. There has been nothing to invalidate our transaction so far, and we shall continue with the work. The engine will be here tomorrow or day after."

"Will it?" Tal's voice rang with eagerness.

"Talbot!"

"Of course, mother," returned Tal hastily, and he

cleared his throat again, and also drew back his wandering attention from a spectacle which distracted him; the yellow car, down there amid the bushes. Comfortable, luxurious, and rode so swiftly and so easily! "There is a loophole, though. You didn't organize this company under your own names, which might be construed into *prima facie* evidence of fraud." He made an uncomfortable pause, during which J. Rufus, quite effacing himself into the background, watched Jimmy with the intense curiosity of an expert viewing the work of a promising amateur. Toad, hatchet in hand on the other side of the derrick, vigorously hacked and hacked at a knotty block of wood without looking up, while Blackie Daw, managing to catch the eye of Grandma Curtis, deftly pushed his mustaches straight up in fierceness and straight down in despondency, then left them one up and one down, whereat the oldest stockholder suppressed a snicker, and edged over a little more sociably in Blackie's direction. Ma Curtis moved impatiently, and Tal, clearing his throat again, went on with: "So gentlemen, you face an injunction, and a suit for dissolution."

"Aw Tal, you don't mean it!" suddenly blurted Toad. "Aw look here!" and he slammed down his hatchet. "You people don't really feel that way about this — and us!" A quick glance towards Toad from those experienced handlers of delicate situations, Messrs. Wallingford and Daw; and the same quick glance of apprehension from the beginner in the art. "We've all been friendly, and it's rotten to have to break it up. I say we just get together —"

"If you please," broke in the clear, crisp voice of Ma Curtis, "this is a business matter, and a very vital busi-

ness matter, and after all which has occurred this is neither time nor place for sentiment. Talbot!"

"Of course, mother," returned Talbot hastily. "Gentlemen, there is one amicable alternative. As president of this corporation, I desire to resolve this informal meeting into a stockholders' executive session, for the purpose of annuling the company."

"Such a meeting can't be called without the due formalities, Mr. Curtis, except on concurrence of all the stockholders," responded Jimmy briskly. He was sure of his ground in this matter, and had made up his mind about the balance. "I for one do not concur, nor will I consent to a dissolution of the company, nor will I allow injunction proceedings to stop us without a contest. I'm going through!"

In answer to that ring in his voice, Mary Curtis looked up, and squarely at him. It was the first time their eyes, had met since under the dome at The Hotel Splendide and between them came that definite opposition of will which is a breathless affair between people who have cared.

CHAPTER XI

THE PRIVILEGE OF BEING GOOD

Doctor Bertram Beegoode had chosen his profession and his location with the fine commercial perspicacity characteristic of the Beegoodes, for no sooner had he "hung out his shingle" in his suite of dignified offices over the bank, than various sedate matrons, who had eligible daughters, obligingly discovered ailments about which to consult, professionally, the richest young man in town. In consequence, it was no shock to the newly fledged physician to have his door open in office hours, but it was a shock to look around and discover the McCabe sisters; Dottie in blue today and Lottie in pink, both fluffy and dainty, and as sweetly redolent as a sun-baked field of new-mown hay. At the first sight of these ungodly persons, Doctor Bertram Beegoode, M.D., frowned in resentment, then he reminded himself that a healer must know no personalities; so he received the McCabe sisters with due gravity and asked what he might do for them, though coldly.

"I think I've sprained my ankle, Doc," explained Dottie walking with a quite perceptible limp; and she went straight into his consultation room, where she seated herself and looked up at the doctor with charming expectancy.

"Oh, I see," said he profoundly, and drawing a chair in front of her he stared at her neat little round-toed patent leather slippers. From the slippers upward went a pair of sheer blue stockings, encasing a pair of extremely

neat ankles. In spite of his well-cultivated professional solemnity Dr. Beegoode felt a slight trace of embarrassment, which came because he thought this young woman to be the sort of young woman he thought her to be — and she therefore flaunted sex, in place of merely having gender as all circumspect females should. He fought down his embarrassment, intensely aggravated that he should have had to do so, and gruffly inquired: "Which ankle?"

"The Methodist," laughed Dottie, holding her left foot forward. "The other one's a heathen and dances without any training, but this one always has to be taught."

Since the Methodist ankle was poked upward at him he caught hold of it, uncomfortably conscious that Lottie was flirting from his office window with some one across the street. He twisted the ankle forwards and backwards and sidewise, and Dottie winced. He gazed at it some little time.

"Perhaps we'd better — er — er —" He stiffened and his tone gruffed down a couple of notes. "Remove your shoe and stocking, please."

Quite dexterously Dottie's hand went up under her skirt, revealing far less of lingerie and limb than if she'd just been sitting smoking a cigarette, and the stocking slid down, with a ruffled blue garter dangling its coral beads and edged in coral satin, and the slipper somehow came off when the stocking did, and Doc found thrust into his hand a beautiful white foot with a baby pink sole and exquisitely polished pink nails. She did barefoot dances, did Dottie, and that foot of hers had been several times sculped. To the artists it had been a beautiful bit of nature with which art might well dignify itself; but to

Dr. Bertram Beegoode it was a live foot, a unique specimen, such as he had never seen before, much less so intimately. Professional impersonality was called upon for an over-pull, but it rose bravely to meet the test, and would have gotten by with it, except that, just as he was starting to flex the joint, the foot was suddenly jerked away from him and Dottie laughed shrilly.

"Excuse me, I'm awfully ticklish!" she shrieked, looking up into his eyes, not roguishly or anything, but just looking, and the red blood surged into Doc Beegoode's face as at that moment the outside door clicked, and he knew that a patient had come in!

He muttered something under his breath, and determinedly reaching for that foot he grabbed it firmly, then, even though she jerked and laughed again, he twisted and turned her ankle this way and that, and felt delicately of the leaders and bones; but his diagnosis did him no more good than if he'd been a hack driver. There was nothing the matter with that ankle; and yet if it hadn't pained her she wouldn't have come to a doctor, would she?

"A very slight lesion of the second phalangal major muscle, if anything," he pronounced, and wondered why Lottie McCabe at the window suddenly snorted and stuck her handkerchief in her mouth. "I'll give you a lotion for it. I wouldn't walk any more than necessary for several days. Keep your foot up," and seating himself at his desk, he rather nervously wrote a prescription, conscious all the while of every rustle Dottie McCabe made in putting on her slipper and stocking — and particularly conscious of that ruffled blue satin garter with the coral facing and the coral beads which dangled against the blue silk!

"Dot! Come and look at Dada!" snickered Lottie, and as the enticing heads of the twins clustered in his window, Doc rose silently and stood on tiptoe to see down into the street. There, leaning unobserved in the shelter of his cigar store Indian, was gray-whiskered old Dan Ayers, the father of three boys and a pillar of the Baptist Church, winking up at those two chickens and grinning like a catfish!

Doc was vexed, terribly vexed, as he stuffed Dottie McCabe's two dollar bill in his pocket after they had gone out, and he went to the window to see what would happen when they reached the street. They crossed over deliberately to go up on the other side past Dan Ayers, but when they drew near "Dada" they swished straight on without a glance in his direction, or a titter of anything. Two stores up, Prince George Prince stopped dead in his tracks as he passed them, and watched. Tom Huntington, whose engagement to Ethie Loftus had recently been announced, looked at them with a frank smile which suddenly froze as he remembered who he was! At the corner they suddenly glanced, both of them, straight back up at Doc's window, and caught him watching them; thereupon they laughed, and Doc came away from the window, called in grim old Mrs. Thwacker, and heard all about her liver.

The next afternoon at about the same time, while he was all alone, Shimmie Devere dimpled her way into his office, and said:

"Doctor, I think I've caught a slight cold." She wound up that statement with the giggle, the shrug of her right shoulder, the jerk of the left, and the infinitesimal shiver from the waist up. "It hurts me; right here." The giggle

again as she laid her hand on her chest, and shivered it.

"Sit down, please." Twenty-four hours had enabled Dr. Beegoode to take himself severely to task for his unethical embarrassment of yesterday, and he was now able to grab a stethoscope and methodically stethoscope Shimmie's chest, right, left, front and back, without noticing her dimples, her piquant chin, her full red lips, or the dancing light in her eye. Her chest was mere anatomy — and she herself mere female gender! Only, the infernal stethoscope told him nothing! Very well, sometimes it didn't. Sometimes the human ear was better, and he proceeded to apply it; but as he approached his human ear to the gender's anatomy, the anatomy suddenly shivered! Nervousness, no doubt, and nervousness doubtless accounted also for that giggle. He raised his head and waited an instant, then he applied the human ear again. Again the shiver of the torso and the giggle, but Doc hesitated no more; he pressed the side of his head firmly to Shimmie Devere's chest, and held it firmly there but all he could detect was a marvelous velvety softness and an agreeable warmth, no out-of-the-way sound at all, except a rushing, constant and increasing, such a sound as he had never before heard in a living chest; but when it at last dawned on him that this rushing sound was in his own ear, he was furious with himself! He raised abruptly and turned to his desk to hide his temporary complexion.

"It's nothing," he said. "Nothing. The bronchial tubes are not affected in even the remotest degree, and you have no cold! The slight pain of which you complain is most likely a touch of pleurisy. I'll give you a prescription for it."

"Thank you," gurgled Shimmie sweetly, and he was conscious, was Doc, though he was looking the other way, that her left shoulder shrugged and her right one jerked, that her dimples were dimpling, and her eyes were snapping, and her lips were red; red; red as cherries, red as rose petals; and curved!

He stayed in his seat at his desk after Shimmie had left the office, and very energetically opened his set of books. He'd started a day book on the first day, and now he started a ledger. He would *not* go to the window; and yet, in about two minutes and twenty seconds or thereabouts he did go to the window, automatically, while he was trying to remember some item he had not entered, and, being at the window, he looked out, and looking out he saw Shimmie across the way. She nodded gaily to young Frank Gippert, of Gippert & Son, Boots and Shoes— She'd bought a pair of shoes there yesterday, and Frank watched her as she swung lightly up Main Street, watched her with a pained and puzzled expression until she was out of sight; and Doc Beegoode watched her with a pained and puzzled expression until she was out of sight.

Mrs. Primson and her fragile daughter Jaqueline were in Dr. Beegoode's office next morning consulting the doctor about daughter's interesting lack of appetite, and arousing in him, if possible, a sympathy for Jaqueline which should be both professional and personal, when lanky Evelyn Anderson came in with Miss Cleo Patra and Floradora Sexton. A figure like the Venus de Milo had Floradora, the manners of a perfect lady, a Fifth Avenue outfit of well-repressed stylish dignity, and large, melting eyes which never seemed to deliberately rove in search of admiration but just happened to rest on one, and melt

and melt and melt. As for Miss Cleo Patra, oh! To say that she was a crimson vamp today is putting it crudely and mildly indeed. She was got up, within and without, expressly to lure and wile, and if there was any feminine enticement she possessed which she had not put into the most effective use, it was because she hadn't discovered it as yet; and she was a deep searcher. "Lanks" displayed today a red jacket, a sand-colored skirt, black shoes, white stockings and red garters. It was she who led the way, and the three of them sat decorously enough in the outer office; but from that instant Doc Beegoode was miserably aware that the anæmic Primsons froze. Waiting only long enough for a prescription, they sailed out, drawing their skirts tightly about them to keep any edge of their garments from touching the scarlet-lined, dove-grey summer cloak of the terrible Cleo!

"Save me, doctor, save me!" invited "Lanks," gangling in immediately to the consultation room, followed by the divine Floradora and the sinuous Cleo, oh! "I'm a nervous woman, doctor!" Lanks tossed her snaky arms aloft. "I'm near the verge of a hysterical breakdown! Ha, ha, ha, ha, ha!" and flopping into a chair, she crossed her legs and wrapped one long, lean foot around the fleshless calf of the other leg. "Sometimes I laugh like this: 'he, he, he, he,' and sometimes like this: 'ho, ho, ho, ho'." She trailed this last illustration off into a fit of apparently uncontrollable mirth, slapping her hands on her knees and rocking her body to and fro.

"There, there, dearie," soothed Cleo the vamp in those low drawling tones which so lulled the senses, and she patted Lanks on one bony shoulder, while the statuesque and smoothly moving Floradora patted her on the other

bony shoulder. "She's like this ever since we came here, doctor," went on Cleo; "you see, at home Miss Anderson lives within a block of Times Square, and where we are now it's so still."

"It's the cursed katy-dids!" shrieked the patient, and the tears were trickling over her cheeks; so the doctor, as in such cases directed by the professors, took her wrist and said in his most calming manner:

"My dear young lady, we'll have to see what's the matter; we'll have to see what's the matter."

The effect of his voice and of his touch was magical! Lanks' hysteria stopped immediately.

"Oh doctor, you are so soothing," she murmured, and leaned her head against the shoulder of the crimson vamp, smiling up at him so very sweetly that he turned hastily aside. He met the seductive gaze of Cleo, who rolled her eyes at him. Turning away from those languishing orbs, Bertram met the large melting eyes of Florodora resting on him, and he turned back to the patient for escape. "Oh doctor, I'm so miserable!" then moaned Lanks, and suddenly twining her arms around Bertram's neck, she threw herself on him and burst into heart-breaking sobs!

Wrestle as he might, the appalled young M.D. could not free himself from those snake-like arms nor stop that wild sobbing, and both Florodora and Cleo had to help untwine her. In doing so, Cleo got herself in between, and for a moment was crushed against the doctor's chest, her face quite near to his; and he had the full benefit of one of those exquisite perfumes overlooked by the prohibition laws, an intoxication more destructive to the masculine mental equilibrium than any alcoholic stimulant!

"Really," said Dr. Beegoode, passing his hand across

his forehead and eyelids, and shaking his head vigorously as if to clear his hearing and jar his other faculties awake, "this young lady should be put to bed!"

"I quite agree with you, doctor," piped a childish voice, and Bertram, hearing it for the first time, turned to the haughtily possessed Floradora in astonishment, and again found himself swimming in those melting eyes. "We shall take Evelyn straight home; and don't you think you had better come and see her this evening?"

"I think not, I think not," hastily decided the doctor, hunting through all his pockets and nine pigeon holes for his prescription pad, which was lying on the desk in front of him. "What she needs is sleep. Report to me in the morning, and in the meantime I'll give you a prescription for Miss—Miss— " He looked up, and this time, lingered in the seductive orbs of Cleo, who smiled vaguely and in those low lulling tones said — what was it she seemed to be saying: There's a silken couch 'neath the canopy of stars, and across the moonlit sea there wafts the spiced breeze of Araby; there's the sound of a lute from the flowering shrubs, and the madness of wine lies upon your lips. No, that wasn't it, confound it!

"Beg your pardon. What name did you say?" inquired the poor, dazed doctor.

"Miss Evelyn Anderson," drawled the crimson vamp with her misty smile, and slowly her eyes veiled themselves beneath her long silken lashes.

Presently Doc Beegoode realized that his visitors were gone. He walked to the window as a somnambulist might. They were not visible on the street. He went back, and paused automatically in front of his bookcase where were arranged the yellow and green-backed books of his four

years of hard study. They were deficient, those books, woefully deficient! They had told him, it is true, a million facts about women, but not one word about femininity! And that accursed perfume still hung in the air like all the sense-alluring rhythm from out some rose-leafed volume of old Persian love poems! Suddenly angry, Bertram threw all his windows and his doors wide open, and burnt a wicked-scented disinfecting pastile to clear his rooms — and his brain!

Filled still with the sort of rage that inspired the naive zealots of old, they who tried to conquer temptation by destroying everything innocent or guilty which could tempt, Doc went home to lunch, where he found an ally of hate in that sterling virgin, sister Caroline. Leave it to Caroline Beegoode, and the dungeon and the rack, the red hot pinchers and the burning stake were but mild torments for the brazen hussies who went trapesing up and down Main Street, dressed gaudily at any time of day as for the evening, ambrosial of soap and scented talcum, and corrupting the pure minds of the men of Fawnlake City with their disreputable youth and beauty! Moreover, and here spake a still small voice within Caroline, were they not friends of that arch deceiver, Horace G. Daw, the married man! Where Doc had the rankling rage of the righteous, Caroline had the spewing venom of the spurned, and nothing would do her but to go straight up on the hill and purify the moral atmosphere.

The moral atmosphere on the hill at this particular hour fairly tingled with what might be termed moral ozone, which to breathe was more than exhilarating if the lungs could stand it. Inside the long disused Waite parlor somebody was thumping the old square piano, at such a

pace and syncopation as must have set its bandy legs a-jiggle; out on the porch a large young woman, with her skirts held to her knees, rehearsal style, was heeling the porch floor with a vigorous Alabama hoe-down; from the pool in the spring-run back of the Waite place, where the Gander family used to swim in sedate privacy, there came the sounds of splashing and indecorous shrieks; in the top of the beech tree near the croquet grounds a roly-poly little girl with dimples and a flaming yellow negligee, sat astride a limb swinging her legs and whistling; and from around the corner of the house appeared two daintily formed girls, twins, in knickerbockers and with fencing foils under their arms. These, at sight of a passing farmer wagon piled high with apples, dashed madly down to the picket fence, and shouting "Ooh, ooh! Ooh, ooh!" to the farmer boy, blew him kisses from the middle of their palms and asked if his apples were good. All oblivious, they, and the farmer boy as well, to the shiny new tin coupe which came grinding up the hill just then and stopped while its load of virtue viewed aghast this brazen flirtation, wherein the grinning farmer's boy, a big lout of a fellow, traded a score of apples for nothing but a few smiles, and counted himself rich in the bargain, the fool! But worse was to come, for now, round the other corner of the house there sauntered a sinuous young person in a red bathing suit, red socks, red slippers, red cap and red lips, and with her still worse — a statuesque young person in a one-piece black bathing suit of such scant dimensions as to seem penurious! This and nothing else; bare-footed, bare-legged, bare-armed, bare-chested, bare-backed and bare-headed, the statuesque young person with nonchalant grace ascended the Waite porch, selected the wide porch

swing, stretched herself there in the warm sunshine, and closed her eyes in the ecstacy of perfect physical comfort. In her warm pink tinting and her scant black sheath, she might have been a rare sculpture in alabaster and ebony wrought by some inspired Pygmalion; but to the Beegoodes brother and sister, the beautiful figure in the porch swing was no tinted Venus, but a plain hussy! Filled with the wrath which only the flawless can enjoy, Caroline turned to Bertram, and her wrath was inflamed the more that she found him staring, as in stupefaction, at the spectacle from which he should have turned his shocked eyes immediately.

"Bert," she snapped; "go right over to the Curtis's and wait for me!" So saying, Caroline jumped from the car, strode to the Waite porch, caught the wide porch swing by a corner rope, gave it an angry jerk and said: "Go into the house and put on some clothes, you shameless young woman!"

Florodora opened her lustrous eyes, gazed on the acrid countenance of Caroline in astonishment, smiled lazily, and piped in her baby voice:

"Why, you sweet old thing! Won't you sit down and have a cup of tea?"

A slam of the screen door was the only answer to this; then Caroline discovered the three Waite ladies in the kitchen washing the luncheon dishes and fired at them this Big Bertha of browbeating:

"I came in to give you a word of warning and advice, Mrs. Waite. If you don't get rid of these loose-charactered young women, I'll see that you are ostracised by all the respectable people in the town!"

Mrs. Waite turned, dish-cloth in hand, and the two

Misses Waite turned with her, and together they faced Caroline.

"I'll have to give you a word of warning and advice, Miss Beegoode," said Mrs. Waite coldly. "You have too much money to say scandalous things about independent young women unless you can prove it!"

Bang! Caroline flounced out of the kitchen, but just the same the Beegoode weakness had been touched upon and not in vain. A libel suit threat did to Caroline what no appeal to human sympathy could possibly have done! It sheathed her claws so far as an open attack on the lolly-pops or the Waites was concerned. She flounced past the sleeping Galatea without a glance, she swept down to the gate without a glance at the noisy preparations for the "three-round go" on the croquet court and stalked straight across to the Curtis's, where she found Bert and Mary on the side portico, and let them have the benefit of the temper which boiled stinging hot out of her failure.

"It's disgraceful!" she shrilled, her gaunt cheek bones white with fury. "We can't get rid of them; we have to keep them right under our noses; and we can't even speak our minds about them!" and this last was so much the climax of her complaint that her shrill raise of voice ended in a flasetto crack.

"Sheep can't defend themselves against wolves!" replied Mary with unusual warmth for her. "Father's suit to dissolve our company will not hold. Judge Chelsing told him last night that these Wallingfords are too clever to put themselves in any danger of the law."

"Then they should be lynched!" blazed Caroline, and stalked into the house to exchange indignation with Emily Curtis.

A shout from across the road attracted the attention of Mary and Bert. "Snookums" and "Spots" had come down from the "oil well" to referee a boxing bout on the croquet court between Shimmie and Plomps, and were of course hailed with joy. Cleo the vamp in her red bathing suit draped herself sinuously on Spots, and Lottie and Florodora, the latter's scandalous one-piece bathing suit now reinforced by a picturesque black cloak, hung themselves comfortably on Jimmy's broad shoulders. How stalwartly he loomed over there; and suddenly Mary saw menace in him! Something which she could not comprehend was puzzling her, anyhow; the Wallingfords, father and son, seemed to possess some uncanny power to have and to hold anything they might desire; and it was a power so evil, so selfish, that it left good people, honest people, helpless!

"How is it," she suddenly asked Bert, "that the unscrupulous can secure the best of everything and seem to have happiness besides? What do the upright have to compensate them for it?"

"The privilege of being good," replied Doc, "and the pleasure of being with other people who are good." He had been watching with widened eyes that free propinquity of Jimmy with those girls who to Doc were but aggravated sex, had seen the tall grace of the pink-tinted Florodora, the alluring sinuousness of Cleo, the plump cuddliness of Shimmie with the curving lips; and now he turned to look at Mary. How white and round was her slender neck, how delicate the color in her cheeks. "You still have that little curl in front of your ear," he said, apropos of his thoughts, rather than of anything which had been said before, and there was a curious moistening

of his dry lips as he added: "Mary, all through college I remembered that curl."

Oh Jimmy Wallingford, Jimmy Wallingford! You threw them into this close bond of mutual defence against your plans, and you would have worried, as you stood there amid the lollypops, one with them but still so aloof, if you could have seen the deepening of the delicate color in Mary's cheeks as she dropped her eyes in confusion under Bert Beegoode's burning gaze!

CHAPTER XII

FAWNLAKE CITY IS AWAKE AT LAST

"WHERE do you suppose that rusty old spur track leads?" speculated J. Rufus, rising in the car to look down eagerly into the next county; and the car was Sweet Patootie, now his.

"It leads back to a main line somewhere, you big fat simp," returned Blackie, despondently. They had been driving for three days, and in all the county they had found no natural resource, possibility or hint through which they might make Henry Beegoode want back New Bagdad. At this moment they were eighteen miles from Fawnlake City on a rocky road, and it was near lunch time!

"Suppose you drive down and see where the other end goes, crab," suggested the big fat simp without rancor.

The words were scarcely out of his mouth when Sweet Patootie leaped forward, and he was thrown to his seat and hanging on for dear life while Blackie shot down the twisting hill and bumped into the dangerously rutted side road which was overgrown with weeds and cluttered with branches; and it was characteristic of J. Rufus Wallingford that, though his face went pasty white when the car swerved and twisted he clung fast, for he would rather be killed than walk, and, coward though he was, he would rather go deliberately into danger than overlook an opportunity.

They reached the spur track. Apparently it had been

in disuse for many years, and now they had to desert the car to follow the red rails into the deep concavity of the hillside. Branches hung low over the tracks, saplings had grown up between the ties, and, at the end, underbrush almost blocked their way into a clearing where cinders and ashes and gravel and general debris had forbidden any vegetation to ever grow on that spot again. Yet, as the explorers entered the place of dead and forgotten industry, they stopped and gaped in astonishment, for there, beside two iron pipes which yawned forlornly out of the hillside, was a weather-beaten hut, on the weather-beaten porch of which sat a weather-beaten man whittling a wooden spoon. He looked up at the intruders as nonchalantly as if they had been a pair of squirrels, swung his foot comfortably, and went on whittling. The intruders, after a moment of astounded contemplation, came on up to the porch; and said J. Rufus inanely:

"Hello, do you live here?"

"I reckon so."

Blackie grinned as he asked what seemed to him the next normal question.

"Why?"

" 'Cause it's my place I reckon. Besides, I ain't got any other place to go, and there you are."

Wallingford chuckled and sat on the edge of the porch.

"What are those pipes?"

"Natural gas." The man looked at the pipes himself now, shoving back his battered old felt hat and revealing a forehead which was as polished and as leathery brown as his glistening face. "I was the superintendent of the gas well and the company deeded me this two acres and

put up this shack; and when the gas give out, I just kept on living here."

"Natural gas? How long ago was that?"

"Fourteen year."

Blackie was whistling to a chipmunk, but J. Rufus was beginning to be vaguely interested.

"Where did those pipes run?"

"Fawnlake City. They got electricity now, and they make the gas they use for cooking and gas engines. I used to go over there oncet or twicet a year until they put in electricity, but since then I lost interest."

"Hunh." The vision which Wallingford cast into the blackness of those empty pipes began to expand. "So those pipes go to Fawnlake City, eighteen miles away. Do they run under the whole town?"

"Well, yes, the old part, not the new part, of course. Runs in a purty straight line and right across the bottom of the lake. They was extending it to Titusville when the gas give out."

"Right to New Bagdad," grinned Blackie, but Wallingford waved him to keep still.

"Why are there two pipes?"

"Same reason there's two anything," and the man sighted down the long length of his spoon handle with the reflective eye of an artist. "One wasn't enough. Plenty of gas while it lasted and the first pipe wouldn't carry it all, so they put down another in the same trench. Got any chewin' tobaccy?"

No chewing tobacco.

"Any smokin'?"

"I'll fix you royally, old friend," offered Blackie, and taking a huge black cigar from Jim's vest pocket and half

a dozen cigarettes from his own, he crumbled them all into a blend, observing meanwhile with a sidelong glance that J. Rufus was quite busily engaged within those gas mains; so he mixed and mixed, while the ex-superintendent of the ex-gas well watched interestedly until the process was completed. Then he packed his pipe, accepted Blackie's proffered light, puffed his first couple of puffs with the careful attention of a connoisseur, nodded that it was good, and swung his foot in contentment.

"Who owns that system of gas pipes now?" presently asked J. Rufus, and this time his question was brisk and businesslike.

"Nobody, I reckon. Anybody. Company's busted long ago."

"Is this property in the same county as Fawnlake City?"

"Nope, next county. County seat's Fillamore."

"Do you want to sell your two acres?"

"Reckon I might, if the price was good enough."

"If you were to sell it, would you agree to go out of this state and not come back?"

"I don't know what I'd come back for."

"You're on. Suppose you come over to Fillamore with us, deed us the property, take two thousand dollars and let us put you on a train."

"Just make yourself comfortable," invited the man, and rising with entirely unflurried ease he went into the shack.

In scarcely more than five minutes he came out with a small oil-skin bag, a willow cage with a red bird in it, a cat and two hounds.

"Come on," he said, as he clamped the padlock on the door and handed J. Rufus the key.

Then, and then indeed, Fawnlake City began to awaken to the presence of Messrs. Wallingford and Daw; and what those two energetic gentlemen had done heretofore was of but mild interest compared with what they began now to do; for anybody can understand a boom, but nobody can understand a mystery. First off, those heretofore smooth and glistening gentlemen came out of the Hotel Splendide early in the morning in overalls. Sensation number one. At the curb they were joined by the bald-headed helper and the whiskered helper, both of these also in new blue overalls, and jumping into their long-nosed yellow racing car with saws, hammers, hatchets, axes and sledges, they all drove around the lake to New Bagdad. Sensation number two. As many of the citizens as could conveniently leave their affairs, and some who could not, followed over when they saw the canvas presentment of New Bagdad being hauled from the spot which should have been its last resting place; and what do you think! Why, Messrs. Wallingford, Daw, Jones and Villicksknapfski erected, a little way from the lake, a four-sided canvas enclosure quite obviously designed to keep the interested citizens of Fawnlake City from looking in! Now what did that mean? Loads of lumber arrived on the site, but no outside workmen were engaged, and that meant secrecy! All Fawnlake City was thrilled to the core, and from the core outwards, as within that enclosure the sounds of hammer and saw were heard. Constant relays of those who couldn't stay any longer and had to go back to their business kept those who couldn't get away informed of the progress of things, hour by hour. A rough wooden building of some sort was being built within the canvas enclosure. It was a high building, as high as three stories

but without any stories, and no windows; and no board was sawed and no nail driven, except by the hand of Messrs. Wallingford or Daw, or Jones or Villicksknapfski. There wasn't to be any roof! Probably nothing about the mysterious enclosure excited more profound agitation than the fact that there were no preparations apparent for a roof. There the building towered, straight up and bare, and wide open to the sky! Ah! The rim of a big wooden wheel was visible on the third day above the top of the structure, and it was a grooved wheel, with a rope running in the groove. On the same day, various mysterious machineries were taken inside the structure and uncrated away from the scrutiny of any human eye but those of Messrs. Wallingford and Daw and Jones and Villicks-knapfski; and barrow-loads of sand began to be hauled out, and every once in a while the rim of the big wooden wheel visible above the top of the structure turned, either slowly or rapidly, sometimes in one direction and sometimes in the other. And on the very next day there arrived men who began to put up enormous circular tanks, ten of them, tanks with gauges on the sides to mark the depth of the contents. Tanks for what? Nobody knew, not even the men who were putting them up. They were tank builders sent by the tank company, and they had their money every pay day, and their expenses allowed, and they really didn't know what the tanks were for, neither did they give a hoot.

What did all this mean? The thing was almost past endurance! It was mighty strange that a couple of men, reputed to be grafters, should come into town and work up a boom, get everybody ready to buy this property, then suddenly refuse the money and start mysterious

operations on the land! Why by thunder, the whole town had walked over that sand, or had looked at it every day from across the lake, and nobody had ever thought it was worth two cents! Why, it was almost like swindling, to begin with, for strangers to come in and make money out of something which had always been there! Only, what was the scheme? The sun rose and set and the stars came out, and some days it rained and some it didn't, but these, like all things else, mattered nothing. Fannie Wallingford might sit in her corner bay of the third floor front suite of the Hotel Spendide day by day, and with her pale repression look across the lake toward New Bagdad or up the hill toward the Big Hope oil well; Jimmy Wallingford might spend all of the daylight hours up there with the new engine and within a stone's throw of Mary Curtis, with never a look into her velvety brown eyes and never a touch of her soft hand and never a word from the voice which had the softness of a silvery bell; Doc Beegoode might have his almost daily call from some one or other of the quaintly ailing chickens, and might find stirring in him certain promptings which were in but black keeping with his white ethics; Henry Beegoode might hook his spiderlike body almost into a rigor of avarice as he turned in constant wonder to the window of his office which looked toward the golden sands of New Bagdad; all these things might be, but nobody in all Fawnlake City cared a rap about anything but that big structure and those big tanks! What were they? What did they mean? What was the scheme? Truly Fawnlake City was awake, and it would have awakened more if it could have seen, hidden away amid the bushes of the hole-in-the-hill over yonder beyond the county line, the arrival on the spur track of a

big gas engine pump and a dozen huge tank cars of crude oil!

Ah! That was the heart of the scheme, that pulsing engine which at last one morning began to throb away under the care of a much whiskered engineer, who, whatever he might be to all else, was gentle with an engine. Spell and spell about with Onion Jones, Pete was to pump the heart of the scheme, and the arteries of the schemewere those two iron pipes which had protruded from the side of the mill, and the blood of the scheme was the oil, and the nerve center of the scheme was that mysterious structure in New Bagdad where now, within the dim high enclosure, sat the flesh and bones of the scheme, J. Rufus Wallingford in his large, broad-chested pinkness representing the flesh, and Horace G. Daw in his lean longness representing the bones — and both in their blue overalls. A simple thing they had done, after all. Provided with a map of the ancient natural gas system, they had located the ends of those two pipes in New Bagdad where the pipes had stopped when the gas gave out, connected the pipes with a three-way valve and a tanking main, and now they were waiting. Up aloft, at the top of the derrick erected inside their wooden well, hung the big wooden wheel with nothing attached to it except the rope which one of them pulled now and then, for the edification of the townsfolk. Always there were townsfolk about, never less than fifty, and in the late afternoons running into the hundreds. All, all was ready except the oil!

"What's the matter with the blasted stuff?" growled J. Rufus, chewing nervously at the now mop-like end of a huge black, un-lighted cigar. "I can't even get a smell out of that pipe!"

"Well, you ought to be able to smell it, for there've been four tank cars pumped into it," worried Blackie. "They'd started on the fifth when I left the hole-in-the-hill, and I was less than thirty minutes on the way. But say, Jim, not a drop had come back in the return pipe for repumping. If your calculation is correct that it would take only two tank cars to fill that pipe from the hole-in-the-hill to here, we must have a leak. It might have occurred to anybody with the intelligence of an egg to pump water through this pipe before—"

"Oh shut up."

"All right, Jimmy. I suppose now we can trot out and hunt the leak. There's only eighteen miles of pipe, at depths varying from seven feet to thirty-five. And do we locate it with our noses or a plumber's torch?"

"Sometime, my emaciated friend," said Wallingford, turning to Blackie from his interesting sniffing process but holding himself in readiness for another sniff, "sometime you'll really irritate me and—and—" Suddenly J. Rufus spluttered and gurgled and stood dripping of oil, for with scarcely a warning rush the golden black liquid had begun to surge out of that pipe, a thick stream two feet high. "Hurray!" gasped Wallingford, grinning through his oleaginous disguise. "She's here!"

"You don't say," retorted Blackie, and dashed for the valve lever which, by a simple turn, sent the oil back to Pete to pump again. Both men looked out through the cracks of their high wooden well, and in all four directions there were fellow citizens, all gazing upward and each wearing the community crease which the great scheme had put on the brow of Fawnlake City.

"Go to it, Blackie," chuckled J. Rufus. "Stage the

ballyhoo!" With one hand he jerked the rope of the big wooden wheel, and with the other he loosed the spring of a stove pipe gun which pointed upward inside the derrick and sent a shower of sand and gravel over the startled fellow citizens outside. Holy Moses, what was that! Simultaneously Blackie turned on the big rotary fan which set a huge organ-pipe to roaring, then with a yell he dashed madly out of the enclosure, ran twenty yards to a clump of burdock, grabbed the monkey wrench which had been carefully planted there and dashed back in, while J. Rufus let out a gush of oil, and held the door ajar a moment. Three boys and two men managed to get a glimpse through that door. They saw the huge, dim bulk of J. Rufus Wallingford swaying frantically over a standing pipe, from which a glistening fountain spread while the big organ tube roared. Oil! That's what it was! Oil! Oh, great heavens, oil! And the odor was unmistakable. The door slammed. It opened again. J. Rufus Wallingford came out, dripping, leaving a wake of strongly smelling crude-oil behind him, ran around the enclosure and shouted passionately to the workmen who were completing tank number six. "Hurry! Hurry! Triple time for every hour you save inside the contract!" Then he stopped to examine the over-surface pipe which ran from the structure to tank one, and hurried back to the enclosure.

"Say, have you struck oil?" A dozen eager voices asked it. The big man paid no attention. He ran to the door. He opened it. "It is oil!" they shouted. "Look! Say, have you struck oil?"

"Struck oil? Certainly not!" replied the busy Mr. Wallingford. "We haven't even been trying to strike oil!" Inside he popped, and he slammed the door, while the

onlookers stared at each other incredulously. Why, doggone it! What was the use in telling them that? Why, there *was* the oil, running in a stream beneath the boards, spreading out on the sand, forming in a rivulet down toward the lake!

The door opened! Blackie Daw rushed out, madly, ran down to the lake where the Wallingford-Daw motor boat was drawn up on the beach, grabbed out a paper-wrapped bundle of something and a gunny bag of something, and rushed back, breathlessly.

"Say, Daw! Have you struck oil?"

Only because the busy Mr. Daw's progress was impeded did he deign to answer, in the following words: "Struck oil? Certainly not! We haven't even been trying to strike oil!" With this, he dashed into the big wooden well, slammed and locked the door; then immediately there arose from inside an excited, shrill-voiced pandemonium, really a remarkable pandemonium for only two voices to execute, and them wanting to laugh.

"Here Blackie! Quick!"

"Grab that wheel, Jim! Hey-eye! Hey-eye! Hey-eye!"

"Drop that, confound you, the cap's coming off!" Clank, clank! Rattle! Bang! Bump! Thud! A volley of expletives. "Here, this way, not that way, you idiot! Hurry up there! Now! That's the stuff!" Clank, clank! Bang! Rattle! Thud, thump, bump! J. Rufus threw a pair of pipe tongs into a tin water pail, slammed a log chain at a pile of iron pipes, jumped backward with all his weight and bumped against the side of the structure which tottered to its top, while Blackie gave a suspended cart wheel a tremendous whirl and held the edge of a tin wash basin against the spokes, then a tilt box dropped

half a ton of rocks into a galvanized iron garbage barrel; and outside the Fawnlakers stood like a forest of petrified men.

For a full two minutes nobody moved, and the first man who made a sound was instantly hushed by his passionately agitated neighbors. They were all of one mind; oil, that's what it was! These fellows had struck oil! No use for them to say they hadn't, because they had! Anything they said was camouflage, for they were crooks, and everybody knew it! Get-Rich-Quick Wallingford, that was enough! If he had said he *had* struck oil, they would have suspected him, but since he had said he *hadn't* struck oil it was proof positive that he had! Anyhow, look at it! There it was! And they wouldn't ask any help; ah no, not they! Like crooks, they wanted to keep it all to themselves, didn't want to even tell anybody about it! And it never occurred to one of the populace that an honest man might also have wishes to keep such a find to his own exclusive benefit.

Suddenly the populace realized that it had a duty to perform, and, turning in its tracks, scattered back to the various portions of Fawnlake City, by foot, by catboat, row-boat, motor boat, auto, buggy, mule and pony cart. Oil! Oil had been struck in New Bagdad! And now they knew why Get-Rich-Quick Wallingford and Blackie Daw stopped the boom and wouldn't sell! Oil! Riches! Opulence! Particularly opulence, all the fabled opulence of the Orient! Within an incredibly short space of time that news had flashed by phone and word of mouth, and almost by telepathy it seemed, to the uttermost confines of Fawnlake City; and it cramped Henry Beegoode with such a cramp as he hadn't experienced since he was a boy

and ate green apples. Great governor, he had been stung, after all! He had sold that invaluable oil-bearing tract of land for a paltry ten thousand dollars!

Tal Curtis sat on the front porch with Ma and Grandma when the news hit the outward end of Main Street, and as the news passed on, headed for Dick Wheatstone's farm and the outlying district, Tal turned around from the last advertisements on the last page of the *Morning Gazelle*, and just looked at Mother; and even the curls at the back of his neck seemed to wriggle with the intense satisfaction which was reflected on his infantile countenance.

"Well, I'm not saying a word," retorted Ma Curtis to his torrent of unspoken words. "Goodness knows nobody would be happier than I if oil were to be struck on our place, so why you look at me that way I don't know!"

"My, my! So Mr. Wallingford and Mr. Daw have struck oil," excitedly quavered Grandma. "I'm very glad, for their sakes. I don't care what anybody says, Emily, I like Mr. Wallingford and Mr. Daw; and Jimmy and Eddie!"

"Why, Grandma!" and Ma Curtis turned to her in astonishment. "Do you hear what she says, Tal?"

"Yes, Emily," responded Tal. Rising he strolled nonchalantly around to the side portico as if he were going nowhere in particular. Ma Curtis knew exactly where, but she pretended not. After all, if there was oil—

Talbot Curtis's step was brisk the instant he stepped on the grass, and he scrambled straight up the hill to where the new donkey engine was panting away and the long coils of new cable lay waiting to snake themselves down into that apparently depthless hole which yielded

nothing but dust. The boys heard the gravel rattling as he came, and Toad was ready with his always hearty:

"Why, here's Tal! Hello, Tal!" then he stopped, for Tal's face bore the portent of the great news he carried.

"Well, well, boys, I'll declare!" he began, when he was still so far away that he had to shout: "If your daddies haven't struck oil on their sand lots across the lake!"

"Oil!" Both boys blinked, then, as with a mutual thought they turned to each other inquiringly. "Oil!"

"Oil! There isn't any doubt about it, because it was seen flowing out of the well, by fifty or sixty people, or maybe two or three hundred by this time, although both your daddies deny it!"

"Oh," commented Jimmy, and now the looks which he and Toad exchanged bore a new and a grim significance. Jimmy was the first to recover, and to have a knowledge of what his actions should be under the circumstance. "Hurray, Toad!" and he threw up his hat. "I guess that proves you were right in your geological instinct!"

"Just the same I know there's oil down here," sullenly declared Toad, not throwing up his hat or anything.

"Of course there is!" exulted Tal. "Nobody disputes it! Nobody's going to dispute it from now on! Hurray!" and Tal threw up his hat.

"Cheer up, Toad!" cried Jimmy, slapping his freckled partner on the back. "Don't be so grumpy because the dads beat us to it. Hurray!"

"Hurray!" yelled Toad, getting his cue at last, and he threw up his hat. "Hurray! Hurray! Hurray!" Being started he was now more enthusiastic than any of them. He pounded Jimmy on the back, he pounded Tal on the back, and grabbing their hands he did a wild circle with

them. But when Tal had gone back down the hill with his chest expanded broadly, and him plumb full of Oriental opulence, the two boys sat limply on a pair of saw bucks and gazed at each other in deep dejection — for they knew, they knew!

CHAPTER XIII

KISSES FOR LITTLE MARY

Oscar, of the Hotel Splendide, was in no wise interested in the ethics or the morals of J. Rufus Wallingford and his entourage. Sufficient was it for Oscar that Mr. Wallingford was a man for whom nature ripened her choicest fruits, a man for whose exquisitely sensitive palate the greatest artists of the world might mix a sauce, a man who came to the table clean and glistening as one purified for some sublime ceremonial; and if he had struck oil that day, as all the town so agitatedly proclaimed, why, very fine, if it pleased the gentleman to have struck oil and put him in cheerful appetite— for there was to be a goose prepared by Oscar's own dexterous hand, with orange sauce and stewed olives!

In cheerful appetite indeed was the large oil striker this evening, pinker than usual, more beaming than usual, more twinkling of eye, and every now and then, as he stood by the mantel of the third floor front suite drawing room in his broad expanse of white shirt front, an explosive chuckle welled up in him and was answered by an explosive snicker from the long slim gentleman in the narrow expanse of white shirt front at the other end of the mantel; and Oscar, tiptoeing from the room after seeing to it himself that the table was arranged just so, was charmed, for the goose would be enjoyed! A buxom, fair-haired lady in a skin-tight emerald evening gown came

into the red drawing-room, and viewing the happy gentlemen at either end of the mantel piece observed:

"What ever you do, don't let the police see you looking like that! What have you two buzzards been putting across on this innocent town?" and the laugh they gave her confirmed her suspicions, whereupon, being a wise lady, she refrained from making herself acquainted with any facts which might be embarrassing on a witness stand.

Fannie and the two boys entered the room together, the latter in their dinner suits, and Fannie so stately and dignified in her low-cut black gown that now, as always, her husband was proudly conscious that she added respectability to the "front" he put up, and was therefore a decided asset which he was ashamed to use at its full value.

"Say." Naturally it was Toad who took the bull by the horns, though hoping against hope. "Did you fellows really strike oil?"

Under the level gaze of his wife and his son, J. Rufus merely beamed and twinkled as he informed his adopted half son:

"You'll see in the morning by the *Morning Gazelle*, my good lad, that we are denying it." Both he and Blackie stood in pompous gravity for a moment after this ambiguous announcement, and then they exploded into another loud, prolonged and aggravating laugh as they remembered the gravel gun, the organ pipe, and Henry Beegoode.

Perhaps never was a *chef-d'oeuvre* enjoyed with more tang and zest than Oscar's goose, particularly by J. Rufus and Blackie, and Violet Bonnie and even Toad; but Fannie Wallingford sat throughout the meal in a troubled state of mind as she watched the quiet worry in her son.

Mirth nor family nor rumored oil had any interest for him; he had a deeper and more vital matter on his mind. Things were not just right with Jimmy. He had every reason to congratulate himself with having a shrewd business instinct, but it was beginning to dawn on him that the same principles which govern success in business do not necessarily govern success in love. It had been a cute enough idea to make Tal Curtis's land valuable before he secured a half interest in it, and that arrow had shot true. It had been an equally cute idea to have the lollypops vamp Doc Beegoode into a situation so riduculous that the town would hoot him, but that blunderbus had kicked. So far it had merely resulted in Doc's presence on Mary Curtis's portico every evening after supper. Sometimes a fellow may be too cute! Bert Beegoode was a young man whom any girl in Fawnlake City should be glad to entertain every evening on her front porch! Bert Beegoode wasn't a bad looking fellow, he had no questionable habits whatsoever, his profession gave him dignity and standing in the community, *and* he was the richest young man in town!

Jimmy didn't enjoy the goose, didn't in fact know whether it was a goose or a rabbit, and as soon as the meal was over he got away by himself; for even the loyal Toad would be an intrusion on his miserable mood tonight. As if there were no other direction than the one in which his thoughts strayed, his footsteps turned up Main Street; and on every hand the only emphasized word he heard as he passed through the excited populace, was oil, oil, oil!

There was one other person than Jimmy in Fawnlake City who had no present interest in oil; Mary Curtis, and

she was putting the finishing touches to her toilette in front of the mirror in her dainty pink and blue and white bedroom. It was rather a serious little Mary who looked back at her out of the mirror, for somehow the careless bubble seemed to have gone out of life these past days. There comes always a time when we feel that, no matter how much we may do to keep things exactly as they were a change of everything impends and cannot be stayed. Such a time had come to Mary, and she was vaguely conscious of it as she automatically arranged the wayward curl which dangled in front of her ear. Oh, bother! Why think, when thinking leads to no comfortable thought? She gave an angry shake to the flounces of her slim white frock, and tripped almost gaily downstairs and out on the portico, which, without mention of Doc on the part of any one, was not being used by the balance of the family these evenings!

Across the way some unusually festive occasion seemed in preparation, for "the chickens", always gay with color and decked in extremes of design, were especially bizarre tonight in their flimsy gowns, short in the sleeves, short in the skirts, and as short as possible from the waist up, front and back. Mary regarded them with a wondering speculation which she had at no moment lost since the day of their arrival, for they were always doing nearly everything whichMary had been taught not to do. Especially they seemed not to know that there were such things as legs or lingerie or skirts, particularly skirts, and even as she thought Mary unconsciously pulled hers primly down, there in the seclusion of her own honeysuckle vine. From the earliest moment she could remember, she had been made painfully aware of skirts. Whatever else she

did, she must have skirts in mind, and always this one thing about them; that they should be kept down, down, down! Somehow the nearness of those hoydenish young women with their abundant life and their total detachment from any possible connection with the world which she knew, made her more lonely up there in the dimness by herself, her only company the katy-dids and the tree toads incessantly creaking away, and yonder in the marsh the bull frogs croaking, and over back of the Waite place the metallic tinkle of the brook.

"Mary!"

The voice out of the dimness had a throb in it, and little Mary Curtis turned, startled, to find Jimmy standing beside her almost spectrally tall against the white pillar and the honeysuckle, and very handsome in his dinner suit. For a moment they faced each other motionlessly, and then his arms swept around her, and she was pressed closely to him; his lips were upon hers, tensely, and not knowing what she did, she yielded; pressure answered to pressure, fire to fire, love to love! This was the fulfillment of the promise which sprang into existence on their first meeting, when the imps of mischief in her eyes danced to the daring in his, the fulfillment of the promise which had been in every glance, in every touch through all those days on the hill and those evenings on the portico; in the vibration of their voices and the breath they breathed and the pulsing of their blood. They did not know how long they held so after that first clasp, nor how long they might have held; but in the midst of this ages-old and ever-new call of creation, the insistent cry of youth to youth, there broke the discordant jangle of the piano across the road, and the sound was like the blow of a

stinging lash to Mary. The lollypops, those other girls whom Jimmy fondled! Shame overwhelmed her, the shame tenfold which had followed that unasked kiss on the hill. She strove to free herself from him — but he held her more tightly.

"I won't let you go!" There was a change in him as widely divergent as the change in her; the pleading was gone, and there was a savage ring in his voice. "I love you, and you love me! There's no use to deny it!" Now he covered her face with kisses, her cheeks, her brow, her lips, kisses that burned, until at last he found her limp in his arms, crying; and he knew that love and passion are things of contempt unless they are glorified by free acceptance. "Mary, forgive me! Forgive me!" he begged over and over, humbling himself in a panic of abasement, for he was a boy still and gentle, and had not a man's overriding will to carry him through. But when Mary drew back from him, he saw that the tears on her cheeks were the tears of angry humiliation.

"I am not the sort of girl that I have apparently led you to believe I am," she told him. "Go back to your own kind — across the way."

Across the way, Plomps was at the piano, big jolly Plomps, with a color of blonde hair never known until the world-war gave American chemists a chance, and she was swaying and jolting herself in time to her own vigorous music, and Shimmie Devere was giving a grotesque burlesque of the dance which bore her name, and all the other girls were in convulsions of most undignified hilarity. And — Why, there was Dr. Bertram Beegoode, on the horse-hair sofa with Lanks Anderson at one side of him, and at the other the seductive Cleo Patra leaning a willowy

lean toward him as she rolled her enticing eyes up at him; and Doc was passing the back of his hand slowly across his forehead and across his eyes, as the intoxication of the crimson vamp's perfume invaded his senses.

In spite of the serious new breach which widened between them, Jimmy grinned, and his oval pink face turned pinker, and his eyes narrowed and twinkled as he turned and in his quiet drawl observed:

"He has his medicine case with him, Mary."

The idiot! Had he hunted all through the Fool's Dictionary he could not have found a more superbly assinine thing to say; for instantaneously he was alone on the side portico, with no company but the honeysuckle vine and the katy-dids and the tree toads creaking away near by and down yonder in the marsh the bull frogs croaking. Oh well— but Jimmy couldn't remember any satisfactory bit of philosophy to comfort him in his need. All he could think of at this particular moment was how pretty Mary had been in her anger as she flounced into the house! So, naturally, he lit a cigar, tossed the match into the grape arbor, stuck his hands in the pockets of his dinner coat, lounged across the road to the Waite house and sat in the porch swing to gloom it all over. Blessed be nicotine, friend of mortal man!

In the meantime, Plomps and Lanks, during a grotesque wrestling bout obligingly staged by the McCabe twins, had hurried upstairs with the promptness of a vaudeville team doing five a day in two houses. Dashing into the bathroom where the statuesque Florodora reposed at full length in the tub, they simultaneously thrust their right hands in the water, and as simultaneously remarked:

"That isn't hot enough!"

"It is too!" piped Florodora, beginning to whine. "Ouch! You brutes, you'll scald me!"

"Hold her in, Plomps!" ordered the masterly Lanks, as she gave the hot water tap still another twist; full force. "Shut up, Flo! Stuff a towel in her mouth!"

"Ow!" shrieked Florodora, fighting away the towel. "Ow! Ow! Ow!" But though she might fight away a corner of that towel, she could not get so much as one shoulder free from the stalwart clutch of Plomps.

"Don't you think that's enough, Lanks? worried the hearty Maria Theresa. "Look at her, how red she is!"

"She's got to be purple," decided Lanks, viewing the reddening statue critically. "This girl's got to have a fever that'll bust Doc's thermometer! It's a shame that nobody in this bunch can get a legitimate ailment! I never saw such a cussed healthy lot!"

"I'm afraid she'll get stewed and turn brown on us. Take it from me, I think she's done!"

"All right, Plomps. Lift her out and shoot her into her nightie, and feed her the hot pepper broth."

"I won't drink it!" sobbed the victim. "If you rough necks come near me again I'll tear you apart, damn you!" and even those who had known her so well stared at the erstwhile ladylike Florodora in astonishment, for she was like a harpy unchained, and her large melting eyes were pools of flaming fury.

"Fine, Flo. Keep your temper at a hundred and six and we're right," grinned Lanks, and left.

Down in the parlor Cleo still clung to her post, leaning her willowy lean towards Doc and making sure that he had the full benefit of her insidious perfume, and Shimmie Devere was pulling Doc's head on her chest, and making

him listen to the fact that since his prescription her pain was all gone, the while she curled his hair and threw in her funny little shoulder wriggle for good measure; and to save his life, the Doc, when she drew away from him, could not resist looking up at the red, red lips which were set between her dimples, and to save his life could not keep out of his cold gray eyes a something which made them seem darker and brighter. Red, her lips were, red! And just then Lanks came into the parlor with sedate mien and an air of deep concern, and said she solemnly:

"Sorry to have kept you waiting, Doctor. Poor dear Flo is ready for you now."

Thereupon Lanks led the young physician up the stairs and into the big west wing bedroom, where the fever patient lay in all the fluffy state which the lollypops could command! Never was a gayer sickroom; flowers everywhere in all the wealth of the wild Waite gardens, and laces, and silks and satins in the deepest dyes obtainable. Cleo's precious Spanish scarf softened and made rich the hard head-board of the bed; across the foot-board certain mysterious pieces of intimate lingerie were equally soft and delicate and designed to cause sentimental speculation in the masculine mind, and these were Lanks Anderson's trousseau set, which she had kept unworn now for two years, ready for the great emergency; across the foot of the bed in generous breadth spread Plomps' purple velvet bath robe, her one treasured bit of Babylonian voluptuousness; from under the bed peeped Shimmie Devere's gold boudoir slippers; beneath Florodora's wealth of shining golden-brown tresses were the highly ribbon-bowed embroidered silk slumber pillows carried by the McCabe twins, pink and blue. Florodora wore her

own nightie, a demure thing which proclaimed persistently that it was modest and ladylike and even shy, but which winked as it said it, revealing here an exquisite shoulder line, and there a glimpse of velvety surface now deep red, and here a hint of swelling charms beneath; for the jewel in all this elaborate setting was Florodora, and there were tears, real tears in her large, lustrous eyes as she turned them toward the doctor, and piped in her baby voice:

"Oh doctor, I'm so glad you've come! I'm burning!"

Gravely the physician sat by the bedside, and took the patient's pulse, which he found at the end of an arm so exquisitely sculptured that even he, to whom arms should be anatomy, noticed its beautiful long contour. A frown came on the doctor's brow as he took hold of her pulse, then Lanks, bending solicitously over his shoulder, told him all about Florodora's sudden attack and symptoms, ending with:

"I think her fever began to break about five minutes ago, doctor. She's turning moist, isn't she?"

The doctor scarcely heard. As he finished counting the patient's pulse, he happened to glance into the patient's eyes and lost himself in those large pellucid orbs, still swimming with the tears of her truly painful fever. How pathetically they gazed up at him! Automatically he put his watch in his pocket. With the same hand he produced his thermometer from another pocket, then he needed another hand to take the thermometer from its case, and looking about him discovered that hand still clasped around the patient's wrist. He abruptly released the pulse, frowning, for frowning was the easiest method of asserting professional gravity, and he put the ther-

mometer in Florodora's pepper-blistered mouth. As he took his hand away the patient clasped it, and closed soft fingers about it and clung there; poor, weak, helpless girl! A conscientious physician must do anything which will soothe a patient, especially a fever patient; and Dr. Bertram Beegoode allowed her to hold his hand, until he was as moist as she. That was an anxious moment for the three friends of Jimmy Wallingford, a moment which reached its climax of anxiety when the doctor removed the thermometer and looked at it and frowned, genuinely this time, frowned with concern. Ah! The pepper broth had had done its deadly work!

"How exhausting," piped the patient, lying back with outspread arms after the thermometer had been removed; and her neck was a graceful neck, and her shoulder a graceful shoulder, and her face a beautiful face, and her waving hair was a shining golden brown glory as it rippled out upon the be-ribboned baby pillows; and she was well calculated, as she lay there a vision of entrancing beauty, to melt the hardest heart. "Hold my hand, doctor, please. Maybe then I can go to sleep."

He gave her his hand, and he bent nearer to make it more comfortable for her as she closed her glorious eyes; and Lanks and Plomps slipped out of the room with that considerate hush which friends use in a sickroom. Deeply and regularly breathed Florodora, the filmy lace on her breast rising and falling with fascinating monotony, and slowly the beautiful head relaxed and the clutch of the soft warm fingers lost their tensity, and all was silent in the west wing bedroom; while through the keyhole came a delicate spray of insidious perfume! Then slowly in the

chill soul of Bert Beegoode there awakened his sleeping Satyr, and it yawned and stretched itself, and its eyes began to gleam, and its breath to come scorching between its snarling teeth! Even Florodora, knowing well in advance the effect they had planned to have on him, was startled, when, noting in her well-feigned slumber that the clasp on her hand was tightening uncomfortably and that a hot breath was on her neck, she roused and saw that ugly gleam in the eyes which blazed close above her. For only a fleeting second she saw that lurking beast, and then, like the hyena and the jackal and the other coward carrion animals that prowl in darkness, it disappeared so swiftly as almost to make the beholder wonder if it had been there. Fear, that was the grim master of the beast in Doc Beegoode, the pinchers and the red hot iron which made him behave; and he called that behavior high principle! Fear was the source of every mean repression in him, and fear conquered him now, fear that this beautiful young woman might embroil him in a scandal which would destroy his business prospects and his social position and the forbearance of wholesome men, might cling to him like a leech through life, might bleed him out of half his fortune — if not all! But had she been alone and friendless and without tongue to proclaim him for what he was, God help her! As it was, however, the Satyr, ravening and licking his chops, and with his blood surging in rivulets of flame, was cramped back cowering in the miry depths of Doc Beegoode's soul for fear of a dollar and a gossip's breath; and Florodora Sexton looked up at a young physician who was frowning with extra severity and saying, rather intensely, for the Satyr had somewhat used his breath:

"That was a nice little nap, and it should do you good. Suppose we take your temperature again."

Strictly professional was Doc when Plomps and Lanks returned, and strictly professional his instructions as he left the house; but he was so much in deep communion with that goat-eared demon within him that he did not notice the glowing cigar point in the Waite porch swing as he hurried past. Jimmy half rose as Bert swept by. He had noted those staccato footsteps, knew of the trick being played on the fellow that night by the lollypops, and had caught a glimpse of Bert's face and of the gleam which still darkened his usually cold eye; had seen the moisture at the corner of his lips — the symptom of the elder Beegoode when he contemplated his own greatest desire, money. All this would have been a grim joke to Jimmy Wallingford, except that now, and with those stirrings in the sediments of Doc's murky ancestral blood, Doc was going across the road to Mary! Doc had clicked the Curtis gate behind him before Jimmy came to a full realization of this, and the cigar point held very still, then dropped to the floor and rolled over and over to the edge of the porch where it tumbled into the grass; while Doc hurried up to the honeysuckled portico, and Mary met him there. Tensely Jimmy watched, a mad commotion beating in his heart and singing in his ears, as Doc greeted Mary with a circumspection which must have cost him a great effort, while that dark sediment surged so strongly through his veins that it was strange he did not break out with some virulent rash. Some little time they talked, standing there in the dim light which came out from the Curtis parlor, then presently Doc put his arm around Mary, and for a minute, it might have been two, Jimmy

stood as one in whom life had been suspended while he waited for Mary to draw away from a contamination which she must surely feel! But when she did not, and when she turned up her face to Doc slowly, and he kissed her on the lips, Jimmy started back as if he had been struck.

"Buck up, old kid!" said a sympathetic voice at Jimmy's elbow. It was Lanks, and her hand was on his arm, and in her gray eyes as she turned them on him there was pity — and something else as inscrutable as the Sphinx. "Buck up, old kid. The battle's never over till the referee says ten."

As if even the voice and the touch of Lanks in some way interfered with his vision, which could not see enough yet saw too much, Jimmy put her hand from his arm and moved slightly away from her. Another kiss over there, more ardent than the first, then something which he did *not* get from his gifted father sent Jimmy across the road in a blind fury. In blind passion, too, Bert Beegoode had torn himself from Mary, not daring to kiss her again lest he reveal himself too plainly to this wholesome girl. Inside the gate the two young men met, and the blood of both was aboil this night. There was not a word as they came together in berserker rage, and there was the impact of flesh on flesh and blow on blow until the screams of Mary brought Tal Curtis down to thrust himself persistently between them.

"Well, well, I'll declare, boys!" protested Tal, staunching the blood from a chance blow which had grazed his cheek. "This is no way for young men to act!"

"I — I am sorry, Tal!" stammered Jimmy, and stopped abruptly in his lame apology; for Mary stood among them,

slender and straight, her neck held stiffly and her chin up.

"I think you owe your apologies to Dr. Beegoode, Mr. Wallingford," she told Jimmy with cold contempt. "He is to be my husband!"

For the space of a score of heart beats Jimmy stood motionless, then he bowed and turned on his heel, and went out of the Curtis gate; and inside of Bert Beegoode the Satyr sniggered; for to a glutton one meat is as good as another, and to a miser the cheaper the better, and to a coward anything which is safe!

CHAPTER XIV

AN ALL-SEEING EYE

As dry and as withered of grace as Henry Beegoode himself was his ugly library, outward expression of Henry Beegoode's within. It was a small room, as fitted Henry's closely secretive character. Everything in it was like him; the scaly old fireproof safe, the dusty and ravelled horsehair couch and chairs, the clumsy-legged library table built in the days when varnish was honest and a quarter of an inch thick and sticky in hot weather, and the tall bookcase "secretary," which, with its sharp-pointed fret-sawed ornaments, was uglier than anything in the room, unless it were Henry himself, sitting motionlessly before it. A single dim light, a converted old student's lamp which had been wired for electricity at a cost of seventy-five cents, shed its hard rays down on him from under its green translucent shade, and brought out every greedy, crabbed feature in him, and showed him to be in a highly suppressed state of excitement as he gripped a folded document in his claw-like hand.

In great travail of soul was honest Henry, for between his fingers he held a fortune, a larger fortune than any he had been able to accumulate in all his grasping, griping years. Only, and here was the fly in the ointment, the fortune was not his! Though it could be, it could be. The document was Henry's bill of sale to Wallingford; both copies! Up in the dimmest corner of the room, between the top of the fret-sawed secretary and the dingy

plastered ceiling, stretched a spider web inhabited by a hoary old pot-bellied spider with incurving legs, and he could have told as well as Henry why Wallingford's copy had not been sent back. A wide spider never lets any edible bug out of his web, whether he be hungry or not; and a wise man, particularly an old wise man with a down-hooking nose and crow's feet of avarice about his eyes, never relinquishes an advantage of any sort. Why had Henry kept secret, after his discovery of this extra paper, the fact that he had sold that land to J. Rufus Wallingford? The spider might have been at a loss to answer that, for it was outside the range of any knowledge for which he had practical use, but J. Rufus had a something on the spider. He had detected in Henry a tendency which he knew better than Henry knew himself. Why did the man sit here so motionlessly, as he had done night after night, after everybody had gone to bed, holding this paper until now it was all grimy? Bert Beegoode could have told him that, in one word; fear! Fear! that was the master which held Henry cowering in the corner of his moral cage; that was the pinchers and the red-hot iron which made him behave; and he had called that behavior honesty! Here he held a fortune in his fingers, and it was not his fortune. All he had to do was burn these papers, or hide them, or merely deny their existence, and the fortune would be his fortune; his! Henry Beegoode's eyes wrinkled nearly shut, and his mouth curled up under his nose, and there came moisture at the corners of his lips, and his whole body seemed to curve inwardly toward his stomach, arms and legs and back and head, until the hoary spider up in the corner might almost have called him "Grandpap."

The outer door clicked, and at that instant the hoary

old spider gave a spring as a disreputable night-wandering house fly bumped into his net and tried to tear its way out. Simultaneously with that Henry Beegoode straightened up in resolution, as if there had been some subtle psychological union between him and his soulmate up in the corner, and called:

"Is that you, Bert?"

Dr. Bertram Beegoode stopped abruptly at the sound of the crackling voice, and his startled feeling was closely akin to guilt. Somehow, tonight, he seemed to be conscious that he had always had that feeling of guilt in him when sharply addressed.

"Yes, father," and he turned from the dimly lit hall into the dimly lit library.

"What do you think of this?"

Doc, glad for any diversion which might distract attention from the fermenting dregs within himself, took the paper, glanced at it, and looked up in surprise.

"What about it?" he asked.

"Lift up the top sheet! Lift up the top sheet!"

Bert dutifully lifted the top sheet, and now when he looked up his surprise was active rather than perfunctory, as it had been before.

"Why, it's the other copy of the bill of sale!"

"Yes! That's what it is! Don't you remember seeing the big swindler fold up the copies together? Well he must have folded three sheets instead of two, and kept the outside one, which would be blank. He-he-he-he! And of course he hasn't noticed that yet, or he'd have asked me for his copy."

"That's right," agreed Bertram smiling vaguely. "But what about it?" He stared incredulously as he read

the answer in the leering greed of Henry Beegoode's face. The leering greed rather froze as the father met the incredulity in the pale gray eye of his son, and each peered down into the depths of the other's soul. It was the first moment in their lives that these two men had been honest with each other or even with themselves, and the revelation fitted now into the disordered mind of Dr. Bertram Beegoode as if it were a thing he had always known. Something had snatched the veil from between Dr. Bertram Beegoode and himself; and her lips were red, and red and red, and her soft arms were of a long curving contour, and her ankle was of alabaster whiteness, and oh, the perfume of her was insidious; and a wayward little curl dangled in front of her ear! And she was sex — not gender.

"Well, there's just this about it," went on Henry almost with a snarl, as he claimed Bert's wandering attention. "This fellow hasn't got a mite of proof that he bought my valuable oil land, except the unsupported word of another swindler, who wouldn't be believed in this town under oath."

"Yes," agreed Bertram slowly. "But he did buy the land, and he paid for it; ten thousand dollars."

"Cash!" triumphantly exploded Henry, and now his vulture-like face leaned closer and leered with the glistening eyes of one who sees carrion from a great height in a far distant field. "You can't identify cash. And this is the way I hold, Bert. It's honest to protect yourself against swindlers! Those scoundrels found out there was oil in my land while they were conducting the boom, so they shut down on the boom, in which I was partners, mind you, and bought me out for a miserable ten thousand dollars, before I could discover the value of our *mutual*

property. Now that's swindling! Isn't it? Well they over-reached themselves, and haven't got any proofs of their trick; and by the living jingo I'm man enough to trick 'em back!"

The younger Beegoode felt tenderly of his swelling nose.

"They're offering crazy prices all over town for that land now," he speculated, and the inherent greed in him hooked down his nose and set wrinkles around his eyes; and it was strange in that moment how nearly alike they were; so like. "I can see where you're right! I don't find anything dishonest in getting back a fortune which was taken from you through trickery, by Get-Rich-Quick Wallingford!"

"I thought you'd say that, Bert," returned his father in relief, and leaning back in his chair he took a long breath. "You see I had to put it up to you, because you'll have to swear with me that you or me never signed this paper!"

You can't make two hounds look each other in the eye after they have stolen the meat from the smokehouse. The Beegoodes peered not into each other's souls nor in the general direction of such, Bertram gazing down at the linoleum which had once borne a pattern and Henry gazing up at his colleague in the dim corner. Presently the silence became nerve wearing, and the elder Beegoode took to cracking his knuckles and pursing his lips, and bye and bye he even tried to whistle a poor tattered fragment of an old air, as if all the important business were concluded, and now they were down to merely the trivial details.

"How — how about that ten thousand dollars?" suggested Doc, at last raising his eyes — to the green shade.

"The Beegoodes are, and have always been, and will

be, I hope, an honest family!" asserted Henry indignantly. "Those crooks will get back their ten thousand dollars — whenever I can give it to them without legal complications. What's the matter with your ear Bert? There's blood on it."

"I bumped it," snapped Bert, and changed the subject abruptly. "Look here father;" he hesitated, and as he leaned forward with his nose hooked and his eyes wrinkled, he came suddenly into close species with Henry and the hoary old spider. "Since I'm going to be married — "

"So soon?"

"To Mary Curtis," Bert further informed him. "Since I'm getting ready to be married, it seems to me that this oil land deal ought to be a sort of partnership affair between you and me. I'll need money."

The old man drew back and looked at his son sharply, and cupidity deepened every wrinkle in his face.

"Well, of course, you'll get your share of everything I got when I'm dead."

Bertram drew back and looked at his father sharply, and cupidity deepened every wrinkle in his face:

"Oh well, I guess I can have anything I want at any time if I go in with you on this."

It was said distinctly with the air of one who knows that he has his whip in his hand, and that the whipee is looking at the lash!

"You're as greedy as your doggoned sister!" crackled Henry. "I suppose she'll have to be paid to keep her doggoned mouth shut!"

"Why should Caroline have any of it?" complained Doc. "She won't have to do any of the work!"

"She knows about it! That's enough for her!"

Another silence. The spider had his breakfast neatly trussed in a silken bag by now; then said Bertram out of a frowning meditation:

"You don't suppose they can prove anything?"

They glanced startled at each other, and then each turned hastily away so as not to see that hateful fear which showed in the whites of the other's eyes. Then added Bert:

"You know, everybody knows they're supposed to have bought that property."

"They haven't entered a deed," urged honest Henry; "and lots of things that are said to be bought, ain't really bought till they're bought and paid for. I — I don't reckon they can prove anything."

He did not seem very firm about it, however, for Bert's query had thrown him back into the uncertainty which had possessed him for a week, and into the hankering fear which had possessed him for half a day — since the oil had been struck! He turned again to the secretary and the spider and his torturing indecision, and Bert left him there, motionless, with the paper clutched in his clawlike hand and the ghastly green light searching out every crow's foot of avarice in his wrinkled face.

But help was on the way for Henry, and relief from his indecision, and the clearance of all his doubts. It came in the morning to the bank, in the shape of a huge, broad-chested gentleman with a jocund countenance, who walked into Henry's private office so blithely and so confidently that it were a shame to stab that trusting heart to the core. If such soft sentiments stirred in the breast of Henry Beegoode he did not show it, for when Mr. Wallingford said:

"Good joke on yours truly, Mr. Beegoode. I've misplaced my copy of that bill of sale. Will you look among your papers for it?"

Why, then Mr. Beegoode glared up in scowling surprise and said:

"What are you talking about? I don't know of any bill of sale between us."

Unable to believe his ears, Mr. Wallingford stared; and then he laughed as one enacting "Oh this cannot be true, you are jesting!"

"Trying to scare me, eh? As a matter of fact, I was scared myself when I found only a blank piece of paper in my file this morning, then I happened to remember that I was doing business with an honest man."

If that naive statement burned hot into the conscience of Mr. Beegoode he gave no trace of such, either; on the contrary he seemed even exhilarated; then he leaned his elbow on his desk, and hooking forward his withered face, he shook his finger warningly.

"Now I don't know what kind of hocus-pocus you are starting, but I tell you this, sir; if you are laying the foundations to set up a claim that you ever fulfilled your promise to buy my oil land, you'll get something you wasn't looking for, Mr. Get-Rich-Quick Wallingford!"

It was marvelous the control which that competent big Thespian had over his blood, for his round pink face went pasty white as he stared at the president of the Fawnlake City Bank.

"Why, you mean it!" he gasped. "Do you really mean to deny, Mr. Beegoode, that I purchased this property from you, with my partner and your son as witnesses, that you gave me a bill of sale for it, and that I gave you

ten thousand dollars cash in exchange for that bill of sale!"

"Deny it? Of course I do!" crackled Henry, now lashing himself into a fury of honest indignation, and he, too, was some Thespian as he half rose in his chair and stood, crooked and crabbed, shaking his bony fist at this audacious swindler. "It's a trumped up story, but now that I'm on to what you intend to do, I'll stop it instanter, I tell you! I've been waiting for you to come around like an honest man and make some business proposition, but if hocus-pocus is your game, you'll find you can't make it wash in Fawnlake City. They lynched a man in this town once!"

"Mr. Beegoode," said Mr. Wallingford sadly, "I realize that I am at your mercy, and I appeal to your sense of justice and right. Why, Mr. Beegoode, I haven't one scrap or trace of proof that I ever bought this property from you! I have nothing to protect me, except your word, and I throw myself on your generosity."

"Well, of all the brass!" shrieked Henry. "Get out of my office, you impudent grafter, or I'll have you thrown out! Git!"

"Very well," returned J. Rufus, brokenly, backing to the door. "But I assure you, Mr. Beegoode, that I'll stay on that property till I'm removed by force! It's mine, and —"

"Shut up! I won't listen to another word!" screeched Henry, and he began ringing his buzzer violently for Ebeneezer Terwixter, even as his caller went out of the door.

At the curb in Sweet Patootie waited Horace G. Daw, and his first anxious words were:

"Did he eat the apple, Jim?"

"Don't make me laugh in public," warned J. Rufus, retaining still his lugubrious and beaten countenance as he climbed amid the crimson-padded cushions. "Did he fall? Why Blackie, he's a safety first player, and that's his only morals. Did he swallow it? Hook, line and sinker, rod and reel!"

Blackie was somberly silent as Sweet Patootie circled round the park and out for the head of the lake, and finally he blurted:

"And you're as tickled with framing a man to sting you for a quarter of a million dollars as if you'd made him the fall guy falling the other way. So help me, Jim, there seems something wrong about this!"

"Well, there is," admitted J. Rufus, himself sombre for the moment. "It's clean-up time, with three or four hundred thousand waiting for the suction sweeper. But, Blackie, I promised Jimmy I wouldn't take a cent from any boob in this town!"

"And that's right, too," agreed Blackie. "But if you were to exercise the brain you used to have when you were young, you'd find some way to keep your word to Jimmy and cart away the loot also; for believe me this, Jim, I'm superstitious, and it seems like seven years of bad luck to turn down money!"

"You poor crook," chuckled Wallingford. "It's in your blood!" Nevertheless there were creases in the brow of him, for this did look like flying in the face of Providence!

Their townspeople, lots of them, were congregated when the oil-strikers reached the office of the Wallingford-Daw Oil Aerating Company, and the Fawnlakers were there

merely to watch the climb of the gauge on the outside of tank number two which showed how many hundreds of gallons of golden oil were pouring into it. Tank one was full to the top, as far as the gauge was concerned, for the gauge was provided with a concealed pawl which let it go up but never down — so that it had stayed at the top when the oil from tank one began to be pumped back to the hole-in-the-hill, eighteen miles away, for repumping into tank two.

With the pride of good showmen who have staged a successful spectacle, the oil strikers locked themselves in the dim high enclosure and took down their lounging suits of clean blue denims, and sat in the crude but comfortable armchairs they had made of boards, to smoke and enjoy the *Morning Gazelle*, which, column by column was about nothing but Wallingford and Daw and oil, from front page leaders to editorials! Once in a while there was a noun in the *Morning Gazelle*, but mostly it was adjectives and exclamation and interrogation points; for this public mirror but reflected in quivering agitation all the mad excitement of Fawnlake City. The fat partner was near the end of his second huge black cigar when the lean partner stopped reading and listened, suddenly aware of a cessation, long since, in the sound of aeration, a simple process consisting merely of pumping the oil in at the top of the tank and letting it drop to the bottom. Startled, he glanced at the meter.

"Say Jim, what did you say became of our three tank cars of expensive oil before the first flow started yesterday?"

J. Rufus looked up with a grin from his perusal of an editorial on "Why Aerate Oil Where There Is No Oil, And

Where Do They Get It?" and he was in a pleased frame of mind.

"Rock pocket," he explained, patiently, as one instructs a child. "Here, I'll show you," and on the blank space around a big cigarette advertisement he drew a deft diagram of the hole-in-the-hill, their enclosure, and the eighteen miles of connecting pipes. Midway of the pipes he drew a sack-like figure. "That's the rock pocket, some place, any place, along our eighteen miles of pipe, and that's where John D. Rockefeller's rebate went. When the thing had swallowed our three tank cars it was full, and the oil came on through. I'm sure the theory of the rock pocket is correct, because after the oil had started we got it here at the same rate as they fed it in at the pump, without the loss of a drop; so the pocket is tight."

"It's a great thing to have a brain," grinned Blackie. "I suppose now we're filling the hip pocket, for it's stopped again."

"The devil!" exclaimed J. Rufus, jumping up to look at the meter. Then as two triple knocks came on the door there was the flash of quick thought in his eyes. "It *is* a great thing to have a brain, and you ought to go rob a fish-worm and try it; because it isn't a leak this time, the pumps have stopped. How does my brain tell me this? The pumpers are outside!"

It was, truly, the pumpers, and as they were let in there was that in the set of Petrograd Pete's whiskers and in the furtiveness of his eyes, and in the bulging-eyed confusion of Onion Jones, which made the oil strikers realize that there was something amiss.

"Well, what is it?" demanded J. Rufus.

"It's a strike!" returned Petrograd Pete, with a grin of

malevolent triumph. "It's more than just a walkout, Wallingford. I've started a world revolution with Onion and me for the nucleus, and my new party is called the Cataclysm! We believe that everything that was has to to go, and the underdog takes the upper hand. Now listen. Without us you can't go through with your scheme, and if you try to we'll expose you, because we got the upper hand. Now tell us how much you're goana clean up, Wallingford, on this oil pumping deal, and we'll tell you what share we'll give you of it."

J. Rufus stopped his astonished contemplation of the glistening headed Onion, who was twirling his hat round and round in his hands and grinning stupidly, and he turned to study acutely Petrograd Pete; but suddenly he chuckled and his shoulders began to heave.

"All right, Cataclysm, you get the total profits of this deal — because there won't be any!"

The head of the Cataclysm glared at the head of the Oil Aerating Company his entire disbelief of that statement, then he turned slowly to Onion, and Onion, feeling himself looked at, shifted to the other foot and reversed the direction of his hat twirl.

"If he says it, there won't," he mumbled to Pete, in an aside which everybody could hear. "I told you if we'd come here lookin' for the best of it, we'd get the worst of it."

"No profits, eh?" said Pete, his furtive eyes glancing up at J. Rufus for an instant, then lowering until they rested on Wallingford's feet. "We'll find out about that afterwards, for the eye of the Cataclysm never sleeps! But anyhow, you still want that pumping done, and want it kept secret. Well then —" and with a smile which was almost honey-sweet in its satisfaction, he held out his

thumb, forefinger and middle-finger, with that significant rubbing of the fingertips known the world over, under every clime and to every race and in every language, as a demand for money. "Five hundred apiece, extra, payable before we pump!"

J. Rufus whipped out his pocketbook, and promptly put a five hundred dollar bill into the hand of Pete and into the hand of Onion. Onion was highly grateful. He smiled his old smile of feudal servitor to feudal master as he tucked the money in his pocket, and ducked his head, and indicated by every wag of his body that all was now well between them; but Petrograd Pete's gleaming eyes narrowed as he looked down at the money and at Wallingford's thickly stuffed pocketbook, and suddenly he thrust out his fingertips again and rubbed them.

An abrupt change in J. Rufus, and the usually genial eye turned to marble as he whipped his pocketbook back in his pocket,

"Get him, Blackie!"

Mr. Daw, with great joy in the moment, pushed up his sleeves and advanced toward the whiskered nucleus with his long lean fingers ready.

"See here, you whiskered lizard!" he hissed as Pete backed into the corner and could shrink no further. "The Cataclysm is disbanded!" He grabbed the five hundred out of Pete's hand, and thrust it behind him to J. Rufus. "You're going back to the hole-in-the-hill and pump, and if you blab a word, or if that pump stops pumping till we say so—"

"My God, Pete, he'll get you!" suddenly yelled Onion. "I know Blackie when he's mad! And my God, you take it from me, he's mad!"

"Help, help, murder!" shrieked Petrograd Pete as Blackie jumped for him; but J. Rufus was ready for those outside, and with the first syllable of Pete's shriek he was banging the pipe tongs in a tin pail; and under cover of that clattering din Blackie's lean fingers clutched Pete by the throat and reduced his next vocal efforts to a mere gurgle.

"You ought to join the Cataclysm," Pete stated without rancor or malice when he was free. "If you'll let me out of here, I'll go back and pump. One of the first principles of the Cataclysm is that you got to have the patience to be the under-dog until you can take the upper hand."

A knock at the door, an insistent, continuous knock, interrupted this satisfactory conclusion, and as Blackie went to the door Wallingford good-naturedly handed back to Pete his five hundred dollars; then immediately realized by the gleam in Pete's eyes that he had made a mistake. Blackie returned from outside, and announced loudly:

"A gentleman to see Mr. Wallingford, and he says no one else will do!" He lowered his voice: "It's the summons, Jim. If I know a bailiff, and I think I do, it's *the* summons!"

Both of them grinned, looking each other deep in the eyes with that sympathetic telepathy which develops between old comrades; then J. Rufus, straightening his countenance to becoming gravity, went to the door, stepped outside, re-opened the door, and came in with two folded papers in his hands.

"Run along and pump, you under-dogs," he ordered, and let them out. Then, when the oil strikers had care-

fully bolted the door after the departing Cataclysm, they sat side by side on the bench and read the summons in the case of Beegoode versus Wallingford and others for trespass, and also in a suit to enjoin Wallingford and others from disposing of any of the property claimed as the lawful possession of Henry Beegoode and son Bertram and daughter Caroline, assignees of one-third interest each in the Beegoode property!

Reading this summons, the two men accomplished the wonderful bit of contortion known as silently roaring with laughter, Jim Wallingford shaking like a convulsed balloon from the hips to the neck, lying back limp the while, and Blackie Daw holding his lean stomach with both lean arms, and doubling up like a pretzel.

"Now we've got 'em, blast 'em!" exulted J. Rufus, wiping his eyes as he regained his breath. "I knew they'd fall, and when I spring that triplicate bill of sale in court, the Beegoodes will be branded as such out and out crooks that they'll have to leave Jimmy's town! Here's the baby, right here!" and he pulled from his pocket the violet tinted triplicate bill of sale, to gloat over it — and at the back of the structure, through a knot hole, there glistened the gleaming, unsleeping, all-seeing red eye of the Cataclysm!

CHAPTER XV

ASS! IDIOT! FOOL! IMBECILE! BOY!

EXTRA! Extra! Extra! Now, truly, was Fawnlake City agog and agape and agag, for in the mind of man there rested but three times when the *Morning Gazelle* had gone to the enormous enterprise of issuing an afternoon extra, and these three were the assassination of a president, a declaration of war, and the divorce scandal of Mr. and Mrs. Mayor Truett, with Parson Trompett as the third corner of the eternal triangle.

Extra! Extra! Extra! Wallingford ordered off! That was the big headline. He was a trespasser on the incredibly rich oil property which had belonged for years to Henry Beegoode, and did still according to the sensational suit just brought. Mr. Beegoode, in an interview, said that Wallingford had agreed to purchase his land at ten thousand dollars, had failed to do so, had no right on the premises, and must vacate! Mr. Wallingford, interviewed, stated that he had agreed to purchase the property for ten thousand dollars, had paid the money, was on his own property, and intended to remain there! When had he purchased the property? Such and such a date! How had he paid for it? Cash! Who were present at the transaction? Himself, Mr. Daw, Henry Beegoode, Dr. Bertram Beegoode! Dr. Bertram Beegoode, interviewed, said it was a lie. This was the first he had heard of any such transaction. He and his father were old residents of the town and known to be honest. Wallingford and Daw were

strangers, and not *known* to be honest and — the town might draw its own conclusions! Mr. Daw, interviewed, said that the climate of Fawnlake City was the most salubrious he had ever enjoyed, that playing the saxophone had increased his lung expansion from one inch to seven, and that the whole Beegoode family had lobes on their ears which proved them to be what he thought them to be! Great Scott, but the town was excited, and in the meantime those tanks, a dozen of them, were being filled with liquid opulence at the rate of so many fabulous gallons per day, no per hour, no per minute! Extra! Extra! Extra!

Messrs. Wallingford and Daw heard that clarion cry in their dim high enclosure, and they snickered i n excellent unison. Henry Beegoode heard it in his dingy little office at the bank, and he listened motionlessly, there alone with his guilty fear. Dr. Bertram Beegoode, making an easy diagnosis from Ma Curtis's recital of her complicated symptoms — she had indigestion — heard the excited proclamation on the streets, and it wiped out of his mind all thoughts of stomachs! He had committed himself openly and definitely to a pointblank lie, a pointblank theft, and a pointblank legal perjury; and, somehow, he felt that every human eye must read that guilt which was on his soul, every human ear he attuned to that still small voice within him. Moreover, to add to his distraction, while those shrill cries of "Extra!" went ringing up and down Main Street, there came in Dottie and Lottie McCabe, Dottie in apple green today with an apple blossom summer muff, and Lottie in blossom pink with an apple-green summer muff; and Dottie was limping again, limping with that trim little ankle, limping with

that beautiful white foot! He hastily closed the consultation room door, but that did not shut them out. He was totally distrait, was the doctor, and had ceased to listen to Ma Curtis, not even aware that she had suddenly switched from her symptoms to those Wallingfords; he was looking down at the floor, where all was apple-green and blossom-pink. It was the left foot with which Dottie limped, the Methodist foot; ha-ha! Strange he hadn't been able to detect the slightest inflammation a week ago, the slightest anything the matter with it, except its alabaster whiteness of skin, and its marvelous texture, and the delicate tracery of blue veins; *its baby pink sole!* The left foot, the Methodist foot. What a noisy thing this call of "Extra" was! Why was it necessary to insist that the public should know all the details of the Beegoode-Wallingford suit! The left foot. He'd have to make a more minute examination, and —

"What on earth are you doing!" came the shrill voice of Doc's future mother-in-law; and with a hot surge of crimson racing up his neck to his temples, he found himself with Ma Curtis's bony left foot in his hand and him twisting and turning it while he tenderly felt around the ankle bone. For once in his life, Bert Beegoode's intellect worked rapidly. It had to!

"There is not the slightest degree of puffiness about the ankle, Mrs. Curtis, as I expected to find after the symptoms which you have so thoroughly detailed to me, so I conclude that you have no trace of kidney trouble. Do your ankles never swell?"

"Well, I can't say they do," returned Ma Curtis, somewhat abating her rigidity as she began now to speculate on this new symptom; and it was a moral certainty that

she'd be able to report a swelling of the ankles within forty-eight hours! "Let me see, it seems to me that while I was on that trip to Chicago, or was it when we went to the St. Louis World's Fair—" Then Bert let her talk on and on, for out there he heard the door open, then the voice of Shimmie Devere, Shimmie with the dimples and the red, red lips; and when she laughed, with that laugh which seemed to have a dimple in it too, poor Bert Beegoode's stout resolutions fell, under the very eye of Ma Curtis, now regarding him with dawning disfavor; for he was but a he-person after all, and frail! He had intended to turn these distracting young patients over to old Doc Wright, who was a hard-boiled egg when it came to feminine blandishments and got along with the sex by abusing them, but as he ushered out his prim and proper mother-in-law-to-be, and saw those three faces smiling up at him in that congenial heart-warming way they had, why —

"Well, old dear, how are you?" hailed Shimmie, in time for Ma Curtis to hear it — just before she slammed the door! "I'm first, Doc. You'll have to lean on my chest again; I think it still hurts."

Dimpling, she led the way to the consultation room where she slipped a soft arm around Doc's neck and drew his head on her soft chest, and suddenly the timorous restraint in Bert Beegoode's warp and fibre broke and he became bold! He had taken out his watch automatically, but he let the second hand go round and round. How could a fellow count with this girl's soft little hand resting on his head, and holding it there! Dottie and Lottie McCabe rose very silently, smiling at each other, and very silently they tiptoed to the door and looked in, stuffing their hand-

kerchiefs in their mouths as Shimmie, over Doc's head, gave a correct imitation of a wiggle dance with her eyes, while Doc, pillowed on her warm bosom and looking up, at her red red lips, shamelessly and positively leered, though not expertly; for he was using a set of facial muscles which had never before been exercised. Splendid! Dottie and Lottie coughed in unison, and something clicked behind the ornamental glass eyes in the apple-green and the blossom-pink muffs.

Extra! Extra! Extra! Jimmy Wallingford and Toad Jessup heard the call upon their hill where the donkey engine was now at work, and Toad ran down to the road and bought a paper from the bare-legged urchin who had the enterprise to run out so far with them. He read the headlines and passed the *Gazelle* to Jimmy, and that young man, reading it doggedly through and through, sat down and gave himself over to bitter reflection. This was Jimmy's thin hour. Only one savage determination buoyed him up; the solitaire diamond must disappear from Mary Curtis's finger! But even as he set his jaws on this determination, something smarted in his eyes like acid. Just going down the hill was Mary in her pretty fluffy white chiffon frock, and with the leghorn hat which she had worn on that first day; and something gripped at his heart, and something swelled the Adam's apple in his throat, and something made him sick! As for Toad Jessup, at the levers of the donkey engine, he doggedly raised that drill and dropped it, and raised and dropped it. He was digging for oil, was Toad!

He was not the only one. It had occurred to a great many people by this time that digging was a highly interesting occupation, and that the erection of a derrick was

the only natural and normal use for lumber. Everybody who had a front yard or side yard or back yard was preparing to dig in it for oil; from every vacant lot the rubbish was being cleared; the trustees of the Baptist Church voted to use the cemetery annex for a temple-fund well, and Jed Purvit even sold his pigs because their sty was the only place he had in which to seek his fortune. On Monday three derricks had reared their angular tops above Fawnlake City's tree-softened skyline; and on Tuesday there were half a dozen; and on Wednesday Henry Beegoode was advertising that within a week, when his case was to be tried and the courts would remove the trespassers from his property, he would sell allotments of oil land in New Bagdad; and on Thursday an artesian well which many declared tasted of oil was struck on Timothy Hollywood's farm; and on Friday over in Titusville the progressive town council, sealing firmly their re-election, gave over the town commons to oil prospectors; and on Saturday the Wallingford-Daw well apparently got from under control and kept up the excitement to fever heat by spreading not less than a hundred gallons of the precious fluid out on the sands and the surface of the lake; and on Sunday everybody laid off to talk oil! There didn't seem any other topic worth while — except in the park-side-front rooms of the third floor of the Hotel Splendide. The turkey-red mutual parlor of the Wallingford suite, the Daw suite and the Jimmy and Toad suite, was conspicuously free from the echoes of oil — for the least said the soonest mended! There was a strain in the family gathering, united though they were in sympathy and affection. A crucial time was come into the life of Jimmy, and the five people who loved him had

little else in their minds. Of them all, perhaps the hardest situation was endured by Fannie Wallingford. She had borne this boy, and during all the time in which he had been coming into the world she had known of the defect in his heredity, had known of the father's moral obliqueness, and had worried over that moral warp her child might develop; against her will! She had loved her husband steadfastly in spite of the turpitude in him, and that had made her problem more difficult in the protection of her child. Now, by a train of accidents, everything was in a muddle, the whole question of moral tendency and of strained ethics had been dragged into the open, and they, as a family, were engaged in a complicated enterprise, which, as she knew her men folks, consisted of two sides; what seemed to be, on the one hand, and the truth on the other! Whatever was being done was full of trickery and deception, and the mother in Fannie Wallingford, and the wife in her, and the good woman in her, all three independent selves, were at such triangular war as to keep her constantly, by day or by night, in silent grief, in silent apprehension; for the only way in which she could hold herself in readiness for wise help was by silence. The things which had been set in motion had far too much momentum to be stopped by a word.

No such depression weighed on the soul of Violet Bonnie Daw, however. She was one whom silence could kill and gloom make mad; so it was fortunate for Violet that there was one topic on which she could freely dilate. Chickens! Doc Beegoode and the feathery fluffs under her wing were the delight of her soul and the burden of her song. It was she who devised, and set in motion, all the tricks and wiles by which Doc Beegoode in this past week had

been pushed from the path of virtue into the range of concealed cameras! In spite of the fact that he had pledged his entire male integrity to the sweetest and the purest and the prettiest girl in town, he stole the thing he had pledged and scattered it recklessly amid the lollypops at every secret opportunity. A born sneak, was Doc, and you couldn't coax him on a bet to do an indiscretion where any human eye might behold! When he kissed Cleo the crimson vamp, it was behind the door; and when he was inveigled into trying a can-can dance with the McCabe twins you may be sure it was behind drawn blinds; and when he put his arm around the divine Florodora, in her one-piece bathing suit, it was behind the leafy screen of the alder bushes bordering the pool; and when he met any of the girls on the street it was with the austere dignity of a professional man, which, strange to say, they seemed to respect. No gossip was rife with the fair name of Dr. Bertram Beegoode, no tongues wagged, and no fingers of scorn were pointed anywhere in his direction. Yet he was laying up for himself a tumble which would make Humpty-Dumpty's fall look like a ride in a rocking chair; for the chief industry of the lollypops, when not vamping Doc, was to print copies, hundreds of them, of every fool photograph they had taken of him! Would gossip wag and scorn point and sides shake with laughter, and a certain solitaire diamond jump off a tapering white finger when that flood of comic cuts was let loose to drench the town with joyous mirth? Oh yes, verily it would! And good-night doctor!

Something of the grimness of this coming triumph was in Jimmy, when, on the morning of the day before the great Beegoode-Wallingford trial, he started for the hill

some half hour after the restlessly industrious Toad. As he came out of the hotel he met Mary, face to face. Nothing new in this. At some time or other every day he met her, but she never met him. On this occasion, however, as she turned indifferently away from him, she happened to glance across towards Dr. Bertram Beegoode's office, and at the same instant somebody up in the sun parlor of the Hotel Splendide opened a swinging window which shot the reflection of the morning sunlight straight into Bertram's consultation room, and revealed the doctor slapping Maria Theresa Plomps on the plump shoulder, receiving in return therefor an affectionate slap which made all hearty between them — then the flash of sunlight was gone, and in Mary's eyes there was a piteous look as if she had been struck a blow by some ruthless hand. The color came up in Jimmy's face, for he, too, had seen this tableau, and by the poignant sympathy which was in him for her he shared Mary's humiliation; but she set her pale lips and raised her pretty head and turned to Jimmy with all the dignity and pride which the Curtis family had inherited, and could use easily when occasion arose.

"That is your doing!" she told him, addressing him so unexpectedly and so hotly that he was shocked into stupid silence. "What do you hope to gain by it? I shall marry Bert no matter what happens, for I have given him my promise, and my promise is sacred! Don't you suppose I've seen through your elaborate scheme? Bert was without a single bad habit until you set these young women to corrupt him!"

"And you thought he was too good to be a human man!" blazed Jimmy. "He's a sneaking cur, a thief and a girl

chaser at heart! I've proved that he isn't worthy of you, and everybody will know it soon! He'll be the joke of the town!"

"That's when he will need me most," Mary quietly informed him, and setting her pale lips again she walked away from Jimmy, straight and slim, her chin held high and her head set proudly on her slender neck.

"Mr Wall — Mr. Wallingford!" The tone was sharp and perëmptory, and it roused Jimmy from his second stupor. He turned and saw at the hotel entrance President Burrowes of the A. I. and E. Railroad; but when he hurried back to shake hands with his friend from Fillamore he found but an inactive palm pressed to his, while the good nature of Mr. Burrowes seemed to have evaporated. In place of a comfortable looking fat man with a pleasant eye, he seemed particularly solid today with an unpleasant eye, and he said: "I'm not going to put through that junction."

"But — but you promised!" gulped young Mr. Wall Wallingford, floored by the suddenness of this, and unable to recall in any degree the poise of energetic young business man which he had so successfully worn in his last interview with Mr. Burrowes.

"I never continue in business with a man I can't trust!" retorted that gentleman, and went into the hotel.

At *any* other time Jimmy would have followed him, but now he was too disheartened. Every block in his hopeful edifice had fallen on him, and had bruised and crushed him so that the breath was out of him. He was about all in, was Jimmy Wallingford; Tal Curtis's land, without that railroad, was worth just what it had been when Jimmy came to town, nothing; and there was no

oil at the present bottom of that well, and no indication that there was further down; and the lollypop photograph gallery was of no earthly use except to inflict pain on Mary. He had made a mess of things. At no time in his whole life had he delved so deeply into himself, or found so much within himself to hold in profound contempt as he plodded miserably up Main Street hill, his hands in his pockets and his head drooped — and yet it was characteristic of him and of the blood he had from his father's veins, that even in this moment he found one segment of his brain twisting and turning and contriving to find some shrewd way to wrest victory out of all this defeat. Hopeless, altogether hopeless! There was no way except the way of honor; to relinquish his hold on Tal Curtis's land, to leave this town, and to forget Mary; and down deep amidst all his self-abasement the thing cried out which would not be still, which would not let him accept this honorable finish. He loved her! He wanted her!

He was in this warring mood when he reached the Curtis place, and he stopped abruptly at the sound of shouts from up there. Toad and Tal were yelling and he could hear the shrill quavering voice of Grandma Curtis, and, as he hurried up the hill, Ma Curtis was the first to see him. That stiff and haughty lady actually came running toward him, shouting hysterically:

"Oil, Jimmy! We've struck oil!"

Tal and Toad were on him next, pounding him on the back and telling him all about it, but he scarcely heard, for there before him he saw the miracle spouting into the morning sunlight, a black column ten feet high, splashing into a fountain of rich, deep amber!

It wasn't much of a gusher, that oil well, just a com-

fortable, steady spouter which surged up a thick stout stream of the precious fluid and rolled in a turgid brook down the hillside and through the ravine to a depression, where it began to form in a viscid lake, and the spouter gave such trouble in being capped and restrained from its waste, that its lustiness was a marvel of joy.

Oil! Oil! Oil!

The news was over the town like wild fire, and if there had been a thrill before, now there was madness! Oil had been struck on the Curtis place, and, as if the magic carpet of Arabia had transported them thither, the population of the town seemed to suddenly spring up around the Big Hope well. Fawnlake City swarmed the Curtis farm, it came through the Curtis garden, around by the road, across the fence, up over the hill from the other side, and in wild abandon it gesticulated and whooped and shouted and gabbled and looked; with all its eyes it looked! There it poured, rich, golden oil! Mad dreams of wealth fulfilled! Riches! Money! The opulence of the Orient!

Oil! Oh, oil, oil, oil! Never was there a more frantic demonstration. People who had no more than said howdy-do to Talbot Curtis for years became his very best friends in the twinkling of an eye, and so many pounded his back that he began to be fearful of blisters. Ma Curtis, after the first delirious excitement to which she had given way, suddenly bethought herself of the haughtiness and dignity becoming her position as being now both the richest lady in the town and the matron of the foremost family, and she retired to the front porch, where she sat in great dignity and hauteur, stiff and stately, and received condescendingly the plaudits of the population. Grandma

Curtis, pleased through and through by the startling turn of events, wandered here and there and everywhere with a delicate flush on her waxen cheeks, and all she could say was "My, my, my!" over and over again to all, while she seemed to have a profound impression that the striking of the oil had somehow entirely rehabilitated, morally, ethically, spiritually, socially, psychologically, financially and all other ways, those nice young men Jimmy and Toad, to whom time after time she circled around to pat on the arm; and not only were they rehabilitated, of course, but that nice Mr. Wallingford and that *funny* Mr. Daw, of course, — and now everything would be all right again.

Assuredly all right, for here was little Mary Curtis, her eyes wide with all the excitement of that energetic liquid fortune. Toad shouted to her gleefully as he put on the last twist which fastened the cap and stopped the waste, and her silvery laugh rang out for the first time in many days as she hurried over to congratulate him.

"Isn't it great, Mary!" shouted Jimmy. "Isn't it great! Isn't it great!" and there he was standing right before her, beaming down at her as if there had never been anything amiss between them, and apparently all unconscious in his enthusiasm that his face and hair were splashed with oil and his clothes and his hands were dripping with it.

For an instant something in Mary which she could not repress leaped in answer to that enthusiasm, leaped in answer to Jimmy — then she remembered, and stiffened!

"Look here, Mary! Don't let's keep this up! I stayed in this town for two things. I've gotten one of them, and I'll get the other!"

Ass! Idiot! Fool! Imbecile! *Boy!* It should have been

no surprise to him that Mary Curtis faced him flaming with indignation.

"Never!" she cried. "Never, never, never, never!"

She started down the hill, and Jimmy, suddenly blazing with wrath, strode after her and stood himself in front of her, and, all unmindful of his grimy hands, placed them on the lace which covered her smooth shoulders and held her firmly; and he let his eyes flame down into hers.

"All right! But I'll guarantee you this. You'll never marry Bert Beegoode! Never, never, never, never!"

She jerked free from him, suppressing a scream of rage, and with those great blobs of oil on the shoulders of her frock to remember him by she darted past him and ran down the hill, ran past the house and out through the gate; and he turned limp as it dawned on him that, with her surprising temper in action, she was likely to marry Bert Beegoode — inside of twenty-four hours!

CHAPTER XVI

PERHAPS

Oil! Oil! Oil! As that sensation quivered and rippled and splashed to the furthermost confines of Fawnlake City, it necessarily, in its ever widening circles — penetrated into the park front of the third floor of the Hotel Splendide where Messrs. Wallingford and Daw, who felt no need to work early and late, were still enjoying their morning cigars over the New York newspapers, a day old but still good. The first they knew of the throbbing thrill was when Violet Bonnie Daw came dashing in with:

"My Lord, boys, what do you think? The kids have struck it! They've got it! Lord bless 'em, they've struck oil!" and the tears were rolling over her plump cheeks. Tears in Fannie Wallingford's eyes, too, as she followed into the room.

"Don't you hear?" she cried. "They're calling it in the streets! It's all over town! The boys have struck oil, Jim!"

Jim put his arm around her as she came over to his chair and held her tightly, and there was a hint of a sniffle in him. As for Blackie, that human monkey was like a jumping jack on a stick. Wild with joy and saxophone in hand he marched round and round the room, playing a medley of "Dixie" and other exultant things entirely unintelligible, occasionally pausing to poke his head out of the window and shout "Hurray!" J. Rufus, however, fell into sudden deep thought, and the more he thought

the grayer of countenance be became. He roused himself to gaiety.

"Wonderful stuff!" he proclaimed, and pumped the pink up to his face and the smile to his lips and the twinkle to his eyes. "Probably was never any more glorious moment in the history of humanity. Son has struck an oil well! Let's shoot out on the street, Blackie, and get the dripping details!"

As the women looked out of the window, Blackie, who could feel the moods of J. Rufus through a brick wall, turned to him gravely with:

"What's the matter?"

"Blackie, it's a phoney! I want to get right over to our tanks and make a measurement. If the level of the oil in the tank now filling is below where the gauge sticks, then it's a cinch that the kids have struck our rock pocket leak! Blackie, I've looked at that map a hundred times, and the location of their well isn't fifty feet from where our pipe lines run through!"

"Great Scott!" gasped Blackie, instantly downcast, but his spirit was up in a minute. "I know the answer, and I bet I beat you to it by half a minute! All we have to do is keep buying oil and pumping it into Jimmy's well till he can sell it! Medal, please!"

"What do you mean, pump it in!" demanded J. Rufus in fierce indignation. "Do you think I want to make a crook out of my own son?"

"Well, he won't know it, you wobbling wompus! If he isn't in on it, how can he be a crook?"

"Well, there is something in that," admitted Wallingford judicially. "It would be us, not him, and I guess we can stand it."

"Well, I hope you could!" interposed the voice of Violet Bonnie Daw. "Husband, you may kiss me. There have been times when I denied that you had brains, but I'll take it back. You had a bright moment!"

J. Rufus was chuckling in keen enjoyment over the idea of immolating his conscience for the sake of Jimmy and Toad, enjoying, too, the cute turn it would be to hand his son a fortune behind his back, when he found a light hand laid on his shoulder, and looked up into the serious face of Fannie.

"Jim dear, you know I never interfere with you, but you must not do this thing. You must tell Jimmy the truth!"

Joyless indeed is the way of the evil-doer when the righteous are about. There was a hush like when the big organ stops in church. Then, with something almost approaching awe, J. Rufus rose, and taking his wife's cheeks between his big hands looked down at her with the worshipful affection she had compelled in him through all these patient years.

"You're a fine little woman, Fannie, and I'm a big slob!" he confessed, and kissed her. "You're right and I'm wrong, and I'll tell him, if — if my theory proves up! Come on, Blackie," and as they started both men were solemn.

Bliss reawakened when they reached the street, however, for there was a throng in front of the Fawnlake Bank, and the throng was there, oh blessed be luck, to buy allotments of dry sand in New Bagdad at prices which would have been taken for a mirage a month ago! The friendly doorman of the Hotel Splendide had no sooner explained the situation to the authors of the oil than

something within them swelled almost to bursting. Oh rare and luscious! Henry Beegoode, tempted beyond his strength by the thought that the insanity of today might be more lucid tomorrow and prices abate thereby, was taking a chance on the outcome of the trial and selling sand he didn't own, which would give all Fawnlake City a personal "grouch" at Henry's knavery. You couldn't beat this! No, you couldn't beat it, and for five solid minutes the two post-graduate students of humanity, though careful to wear masks of deep dejection, watched happily the wild orgie. The much discussed and long delayed boom had set in at last, and Fawnlake City was in convulsions of new birth. Shouting and gesticulating and fighting to get in and spend their savings, the citizens swayed in the beautiful morning sunlight boosting the prices on themselves higher and higher with every second of delay. For a dazzling idea had struck them all; that the place to find oil was where it had already been found! Front yards and back yards and side yards and pigstys *might* contain oil, but here was land which *did* contain oil, and all you had to do was buy it at any price and become instantaneously so rich that you wouldn't have to care what you'd paid for it! There was no question about ownership. Henry Beegoode guaranteed that, and they knew he was honest, and substantial, and good for the money. That was the safety of doing business with home folks! But even though this was in their minds, those of them who happened to see Messrs. Wallingford and Daw were gracious and even cordial to them, for ability always commands admiration, and there was no getting around it, this Wallingford family was a smart family, with highly trained noses for money and opportunity, especially opu-

lent oil! Meanwhile Henry Beegoode sat in his office like a spider in his web, and, his avarice fattening by the food it ate, every time he sold a lot he profiteered the next man, until even he was drunk with trying to comprehend how people would pay such prices, and flatly disbelieved it even while he took the money. Only one sorrow Henry knew, that he hadn't more land to sell!

There had been an almost equal clamor on Curtis hill, but that had soon died down, for those who came met others leaving, and the word went quickly round that Cal Curtis had no land to sell. Be a fool if he did! Anyhow, all Tal's land was owned by the Big Hope Oil Company, and that rich corporation wasn't going to decide on anything hastily. They weren't greedy like Henry Beegoode, they could control their appetites and hold off; a smart young man was dictating the policies of the Big Hope; a Wallingford! And those who came and went away reported that shrewd young promoter as sitting in his tent, paying attention to no one, and thinking deeply. They naturally supposed him to be concentrated on oil, for in heaven's name, what else? But they were wrong. Neither oil nor riches nor ethics were at all in Jimmy's mind when he finally emerged from between the flaps of the headquarters of the Big Hope Oil Company, Incorporated, with a twinkle in his narrowed eyes and a quiet smile on his lips.

"We'll be back in a few minutes, Tal," he told the proud president who sat on his armchair rock, the breeze fanning gently the curls at the back of his neck, and on his infantile face an expression of such beatitude as only the angels wear. Taking Toad with him, Jimmy strode around the hill and across the road and into the back parlor of the

Waite residence, where the lollypops piled on the successful diggers with every manifestation of emotional happiness.

"Well, you did it, old kid!" said Lanks, hovering over Jimmy regardless of the splatters of oil which still embellished him. "I had to hold back the flock by main strength from dashing up to congratulate you, but I was afraid we might toss something in the works and break a wheel!"

"With the doll she means, Snookums," further explained Plomps.

"It's been done," reported Jimmy, the quiet smile still with him and the musing light in his eyes. "I queered it myself, and now I have to play the ace. Which of you girls wants to marry the richest young man in this town — tonight?"

The murmurs which rose constituted what might be termed an ominous growl, signifying that Doc was *not* popular with the lollypops!

"He goes for Cleo's perfume like if it was rum," suggested Lottie McCabe. "I think she could land him."

"Well Cleo don't!" blurted Toad with a vigor and vehemence so surprising that all other conversation stopped abruptly, while they stared at him. Cleo, sitting next to him stared at him the hardest, and the longest, and the most astonished.

"Light of my life!" she at last exclaimed, and snuggled, not leaned, her willowy figure straight into his arms, and slid a flexible arm around his neck. "Kiss me, darling!"

Toad looked down at her from this short range, and his face turned so red that his freckles were lost; but he

was game and he kissed Cleo a resounding smack on the crimson lips to the accompaniment of a shriek from all the lollypops.

"She kissed him, and he kissed her yes," grinned Jimmy, whereupon Toad, muttering some retort under his breath, broke away from Cleo's willowy weight and rushed out of the room to get some cool air on his face; while Cleo sat up with a strangely puzzled expression, the tingle of Toad's kiss still on her lips.

"Girls, I'm gone!" she told them. "I started out to be an enemy to man, but I'm a slave in the first battle. From this minute on your little friend vamp is a prude! Gosh what love does to you!"

"That reduces the candidates to six," figured Jimmy, reaching over to pat Cleo's warm cheek.

"Cut it to five," observed Lanks, and even Jimmy, obtuse as he had been to what lay beneath the warm comradeship of lanky Evelyn Anderson, was struck by some queer undertone in her; but when he turned to her she was laughing carelessly, and added: "I'd do anything in reason for you, old darling, but, personally, I can't see it in reason to sell myself for gold!"

"Oh, a fellow might do worse," piped a baby voice. Florodora had sat in unnoticed quiet, weighing and measuring and estimating generally, and in her lustrous eyes was still the calm light of sane calculation. "I've been broke away from home once, and it might happen again. I could stand him — with money!"

"But Snookums," worried Lanks; "from all I've seen of Cutie, I think he has made up his mind to marry respectably and let his love stray where it will. How could she get him; in marriage?"

"Scare him into it," grinned Jimmy. "Those photographs — "

"I know!" piped Florodora. "I'll show him those photographs, and promise to save him from being laughed out of his old home town, and he'll marry me through gratitude!"

"Hasn't she the sweetest way to put blackmail," drawled Cleo. "But keep the photographs, girlie. They'll come in handy for the divorce."

This seemed a better joke to the lollypops than marrying Doc, and chuckling with a chuckle like his father's, Jimmy rose to go; Jimmy the successful promoter, Jimmy the oil magnate, Jimmy the brilliant young business boy!

On yes! And at that very instant Jimmy's father, in the dim high enclosure over on New Bagdad, finished measuring the wet part of a plumb line and said sadly:

"Well Blackie, the Big Hope was spouting our oil. The level of tank ten is nearly half a foot below its gauge."

"But why do you suppose there's no oil coming through?" speculated Blackie, looking again at the meter. "The kids have capped their well."

"It's a cinch; Onion and Pete have stopped pumping. I expected that, and it's all the corroborative evidence I need. That engine is too light to pump oil into tank ten, and keep up the flow in Jimmy's well beside; so the crew has probably shut down." He drew a deep breath. "Well, I promised Fannie I'd tell Jimmy the truth, and the poor kid has to have it."

"Oh, hell." Blackie stood disconsolately with his hands in his pockets. "All right, Jim, but if it has to be done you'll do it alone! I could no more be in the room

where I must look Jimmy in the happy face when you hand him this jolt, then I could give scalding milk to a kitten! Why man, it's murder!"

"Murder? You sound like a good Cataclysmer," broke in a voice with a slight foreign accent, and Petrograd Pete and Onion Jones were with them, having found the door unbolted.

"What's the matter, Pete?" Wallingford turned to him briskly. "Too much back pressure on the pump?"

"How did you know?" inquired Pete.

"I told you these fellows know everything that's goin' on," mumbled Onion Jones, his tongue so thick that Blackie and J. Rufus turned to him in astonishment and found his big pop-eyes glassy, while his voice was in a shrill whine. "I told him so! Didn't I tell you, Pete? Didn't I say it! They know that there was too much back pressure on the pump an' that's just what you said!"

"Mumik!" hissed Pete. "Hold shut your tongue!" He turned to Wallingford. "What's the matter up here that you know there was too much back pressure on the pump? Did you shut everything down so that I was just pumping against the valve?"

"Acted like that, eh? Dead! There goes our last hope, Blackie. Pete proves my theory. The pump carried an extra load for about three quarters of an hour, didn't it, Pete, then the strain was too much for her, and she just slowed down and quit? Say, stand back from me! What have you got on your breath; nitric acid?"

"Vodka," grinned Onion. "He made it out there fresh last night. It tastes like an old gum boot but it's got a hind leg like a kangaroo! Have a kick?" He produced a flat bottle from which both connoisseurs of good

liquor backed away in horror, then Wallingford suddenly reached out and took it.

"I'll just detain this till some time when I want to kill you with it," he chuckled, "but while you're in our county you can't have it. No man can keep a secret with this on his tongue." He slipped the bottle in his coat pocket, not knowing that they were lugging a bottle on each hip, then he hung his coat on a nail alongside Blackie's and the two of them began to wash up.

Fateful moment. The unsleeping red eye of the Cataclysm happened to detect a sheaf of papers in Wallingford's inside coat pocket, and one of the papers was the violet hued document to which J. Rufus had seemed to attach so much importance when Pete had watched him through the knot hole! It was but a moment's deft work to slip out that particular paper, with no gaze on him but the horrified glassy stare of Onion Jones; and then, while the panic-stricken Onion made many grotesque signals of warning, acute cunning came to Pete. If they happened to miss that paper before they got out of here, the first place they'd look would be on Pete! Quietly he dropped behind the pile of iron casings the only proof which Wallingford had that he wasn't a brazen land thief as charged, the priceless bill of sale which was to be the bomb for the Beegoodes in tomorrow's trial!

Oh yes! The Beegoodes were to be driven out of Jimmy's town and disgraced forever with that violet hued bit of paper, they were, perhaps — but just now they were fair fatigued with taking in good money and issuing receipts to be exchanged for deeds after the trial, and they had already made enough sales to buy up more oil land to sell, and Ebeneezer Terwixter was on his way to get it. Eben-

eezer found the principal officers of The Big Hope Oil Company in their little tent, and with a most ingratiating spiderly smile, for he was but a less wrinkled copy of Henry, he said:

"You gentlemen represent the majority of stock in the Big Hope Oil Company, I believe."

"You bet your life we do!" laughed T. Jessup, his stiff hair glistening with oil, oil in his eyebrows, oil spattered among his freckles, and him so glowing with happiness that one could feel him at a distance like a red hot stove. "You bet we do! And we've struck oil! I always said there was oil here!"

"Your faith has been a great boon to Fawnlake City," returned Mr. Terwixter to Toad, but looking towards the quiet James Wallingford, Jr. "You gentlemen have worked long and hard to achieve this marvelous result, and now you can receive your just reward."

"We have it, Eben, we have it," laughed Talbot Curtis, happy to the core.

"Not quite, but on the verge of having it," corrected Terwixter, smiling amiably. "Gentlemen, I am empowered to negotiate with you for the stock of this company. How would an offer of one hundred thousand dollars be received by you?"

"Oh, go home, Eben," laughed Tal. "I know who sent you down here. Henry Beegoode, and his first offer for anything usually averages from ten to twenty per cent of the actual value!"

"That's an exaggeration, Tal, and you know it," returned Henry Beegoode's lawyer, still smiling amiably. "I will say, moreover, that a hundred thousand dollars is a very fine price! You don't know yet how much oil is

down there, nor if any other wells can be struck on your land. So, if Mr. Beegoode wants to take the gamble, why should you carry it? When you accept a hundred thousand dollars you have it, and don't have to worry. Let Mr. Beegoode do the worrying!"

A quiet voice replied to this.

"What is the maximum that you are empowered to offer, on Mr. Beegoode's behalf?"

There was a spasmodic little pinching of Mr. Terwixter's hook-like nose as he glanced at Jimmy, and then he said:

"Oh well, since we have to come down to solid facts, I may as well admit that I *am* empowered to go as high as a hundred and fifty thousand dollars!"

"I said the maximum," pursued the even voice of Jimmy, and there was a quiet smile on his face, and his eyes were twinkling.

"A hundred and seventy-five!" snapped Terwixter. "That's the last living cent!"

"Then, of course, Mr. Beegoode himself will go as high as two hundred thousand," observed Jimmy, and it seemed so useless to argue with him that Mr. Terwixter kept glumly silent.

"Well, well, I'll declare!" muttered Tal, looking from his young friend Jimmy to his young friend Toad rather expectantly, for this was a lot of money, and Tal's share would just about fix him for life the way he was living; leave his family well off, too, as values averaged in Fawnlake City. A hundred thousand dollars invested at six per cent would be six thousand a year, five hundred a month! And a certainty, not a continuous guess!

Jimmy caught that wistfulness in Tal, and changed his own impulse.

"It isn't enough, Tal, for we can parcel off this land right now and sell it for more than that in the aggregate, if we want to be rid of the gamble; but suppose we go into executive session and let Mr. Beegoode know this afternoon what we've agreed upon."

"Do," urged Terwixter. "Come down to his office at, say, four o'clock, and come prepared to sell." Then the business side of the interview being over he turned human for a moment, and laid his hand on Talbot Curtis's hand. "By gordy, Tal, it doesn't seem real that all of a sudden we should be talking about fifth of a million dollar deals in Fawnlake City!"

"We never would if it hadn't been for my young friend Jimmy and Toad," said Tal gratefully; and when Terwixter had gone he leaned over toward Jimmy, though he put a hand, too, on Toad's shoulder. "Jimmy," said he, "I'm going to leave all the negotiations and all the decisions in your hands, and whatever you do I'll stand by. You two boys have my full confidence and esteem."

Jimmy gripped his hand so hard that Tal's fingers hurt, and there was a lump in Jimmy's throat. *Tal's full confidence and esteem!*

CHAPTER XVII

IT'S UP TO JIMMY NOW

At half-past three o'clock Jimmy Wallingford and Toad Jessup burst into the turkey-red parlor on the park front of the third floor of the Hotel Splendide, and they were such radiant examples of acute happiness that Blackie Daw, waiting only to hear their first delirium, strolled out into the blue room as if after a box of matches, or something, thus intending to "beat it" into the hall and away. He was absolutely miserable was Blackie; but sympathy held him in the blue room.

The boys were so full of their great good fortune that they scarcely noticed at first the irritability of Violet Bonnie, the tremulous quiet of Fannie, or the totally artificial cordiality of J. Rufus, to the which genius most of their remarks were addressed. By turns and together they told how they had struck the oil, what mad excitement there had been, how Tal and Mother and Grandma had enjoyed it, and so they came down to the great moment which was where Jimmy took the floor.

"And what do you think, Dad! We have an offer of two hundred thousand dollars for our company! And I think I can bring it up to a quarter of a million! We're to go into final negotiations in half an hour!"

"By the mother of Mike!" gasped Violet Bonnie, "A quarter of a million!" and even Fannie looked up with startled interest, in which, however, the dread grew. J. Rufus expressed a professional interest in the details.

"Who's making the offer?"

"Well, I hate to tell you, because I'd rather not do business with him, but —"

"Aw go on and tell!" interrupted Toad. "His money's as good as anybody's. Daddy Jim, it's Henry Beegoode!"

J. Rufus stared at the boys in stupefaction for an instant, then he laughed until the tears rolled down his cheeks.

"Henry Beegoode!" he choked.

"Hoot, mon!" came a roar from the blue room. "'Tis a braw bricht moonlicht nicht! Hoot! Hoot! Hoot!" and out pranced a black-mustached Highlander with his trouser legs pulled to his knobby knees. He carried a bagpipe made of a pillow and a saxophone, and he did an extravagant Highland fling intended to be expressive of great glee, while Toad and Jimmie stared in prodigious wonder.

"Well, that *is* a sum of money!" exclaimed J. Rufus, frowning at Blackie, and giving a warning glance to Violet Bonnie who was shrieking with laughter. Fannie Wallingford was laughing, too, at Blackie, but nevertheless she turned apprehensively to Jim as he went on with his camouflage. "It makes me laugh to think that it had to be Henry. That's too much money, though, to pass up, boys, and — and —" He cast a glance at Fannie, and turned stubbornly away from the frightened appeal in her eyes. "Well, my advice is to take it!" he suddenly blurted, and smacked his fist on the arm of his chair.

"And get it all in a certified check!" supplemented Blackie with no abatement in his fling, his skinny legs flying with marvelous agility.

"And say, boys!" Violet Bonnie Daw. "When you

grab the check, beat it straight to Henry Beegoode's bank and get the money!"

"Jim!" The voice of Fannie. It was low, full of the same frightened appeal which was in her eyes.

"I won't! I can't!" Her husband glared at her with both fists on his chair arms now.

"Fannie, you come right here with me. I want to see you a minute," commanded Vi, and grabbing Jimmy's mother, dragged her by force into the Daw bedroom.

"What is this?" Jimmy was a trifle pale, and was eyeing his father with a studiousness from which there would have been small escape for a less agile-minded man.

"Oh, your mother is afraid for you to have so much money in your own name," declared Jim stoutly, trying to escape from that quiet eye. It was a particularly steady eye, and it lacked totally one quality which the eye of J. Rufus sometimes had; the trace of fear.

Violet came back out, and called J. Rufus. He swore under his breath, but he followed Vi nevertheless, though with great reluctance.

"What is this, Uncle Blackie?" demanded Jimmy, and Toad, every hair on end, gazed stupidly; so far, Toad hadn't been able to see anything wrong. But Jimmy made less out of Blackie than he had out of his father; for there was this difference between Wallingford and his partner; J. Rufus had very little conscience, but Horace G. Daw had none; sympathy and sentiment and generous impulse a-plenty, but of conscience, none!

"Hoot mon!" he cried, with extra agility in his fling, and tooted him an extra skirl. "'Tis a braw bricht moonlicht nicht! Hoot mon, hoot mon, hoot mon, and to blazes with the Dutch!"

Jimmy rose, and, walking to the window, looked out. There was another extra on the streets. Toad and he had made that extra! It was something to have set all this excitement into motion, something to have been the cause that those people down yonder were hurrying and scurrying in all directions, stopping when they met to exchange a few excitable remarks and scurrying on again, for all the world like red ants after the destruction of an ant hill. Why, a whole town, fifty thousand people, had been set into commotion by the work of Toad and himself! There was a tingle in it, there was in it the most dangerous drunkenness which man may know, the thrill of power! But what was wrong? Something, he was sure, for in all these years he had spent more time in fascinated study of his father than of any other human being. What was wrong? Something!

He turned abruptly as his father and mother and Vi came in from the other room. Violet swished away and bounced into a chair, her face red with anger. Fannie's face was pale, but her eyes were very bright. J. Rufus stopped in the middle of the room, a glitter in his eye. He hesitated, then, without a glance at any one, he went to the window and looked out stubbornly.

"You'll have to be told the truth, Jimmy," said his mother with a little catch in her voice, and she glanced at the broad back of her husband. "There is no oil in your well."

"What!" Toad was on his feet, and his voice shook with indignation, but Jimmy, holding himself very quietly indeed, looked from his mother to his father, and from his father back to his mother.

"How do you know?"

"Ask your — " Her voice broke. She could go no further. This was the first time she had ever exercised a separate will from her husband's. She nodded her head in the direction of the window.

"She wins, Jimmy." J. Rufus tried to make his voice nonchalant, but there was huskiness in it.

"Do you mean to say that we didn't strike oil in our well?" demanded Toad. Both his fists were clenched, and he seemed anxious to fight somebody. "Why dang it, I guess I know oil when I see it! I knew there was oil there from the first or all I'd learned of geology was wrong! And there was oil there! We struck it! What right has anybody to say that there isn't oil there! Whoever says it's a dang fool!"

"That's what I say!" came in a muffled shriek from the plump lady in the turkey-red chair.

"I think we'd better find out about this," suggested Jimmy, and now there was a quality of deadliness in his quiet. He was in sympathy with no one in that room. He was alone, a human being by himself. "Suppose you tell us all about it, father."

"Well, Jimmy;" J. Rufus sat on the window seat, and stuck his thumbs in the arm holes of his vest, but before he went on he cast an angry glance at Fannie, unmollified by the fact that she sat with her handkerchief to her eyes; "from the fact that you boys haven't asked any questions, I have surmised that you knew our oil well to be a fake. It is." There was the sound of something falling on the floor. It was Blackie's saxophone, and he paid no heed to that precious instrument. "We're pumping oil into our well, and into our tanks," went on Wallingford, still huskily, "through some deserted gas mains, from a pump-

ing station eighteen miles away." There was a crackle of something breaking. It was a spindle of the cabinet on which Jimmy's hand had gripped as he listened; while Toad stood numbly staring at J. Rufus. "We lost three tank cars of oil through a leak into a rock pocket which we have not located. You struck our rock pocket, that's all. Whatever oil gushed out of your well, we lost."

"God!" The pieces of the broken spindle came out into Jimmy's hand and he threw them clattering into the corner. There was not a vestige of color in his face, and there were hard lines about his jaws which had never before been there in any moment of his life. "God! This is the last straw! You've been worrying about what would become of me, about how I would turn out with my lobeless ear and my over-shrewdness, but it seems to me that all the worry should be on my side! My God, I can't even get rid of your influence on my life by changing my name! I haven't done a thing that is crooked, and yet you pursue me with it! I haven't had a chance! You gave me life that I didn't ask for, a heredity I had no chance to choose! And my mother, knowing what you are, brought me up under your influence! She kept me with her, and she lived with you! Mother, why didn't you let one of us go?"

Fannie Wallingford raised her head, and the smile that she gave Jimmy through her tears and the smile that she turned from him to his father was such a smile as martyrs have worn on their lips when they were crucified for some glorious cause.

"Love, Jimmy, that's all," she said, simply and gently. "I loved you both."

Out of the dense silence which followed this declaration there came a choking sound. It was from the throat of

J. Rufus. Jimmy crossed first to his mother, however, and kneeling beside her put his arm around her, but as she leaned her head on his shoulder and sobbed, she held out her hand to Jim — and he was there to take it, and presently with his free hand he reached out for Jimmy's, and that hand, too, was gripped tightly, whereupon Violet Bonnie frankly blubbered, and with no delicacy of feelings whatever where her warm emotions were concerned, came over and threw her arms around the whole Wallingford family.

"By the way, father," asked Jimmy, when some degree of normality had been restored; "what did you intend to do when you were holding back the truth?"

"Well, to make a clean breast of it, son, your mother already had me licked before you got here, but when you told me the facts of the situation I couldn't stick. It was too good to be true that you could sell our few gallons of leakage to Henry Beegoode for a quarter of a million!"

"Hoot mon! Hoot mon!" came like a jubilant amen from the corner.

"You see, you're not selling a bogus oil well or anything like that, just the stock of a company which owns land, and you'd be legally safe; so Blackie and I planned to let you go ahead, make your sale and collect your quarter of a million in cash, then we'd start the pump and keep your oil well gushing till you kids could make a getaway. Tit for tat stuff, you know. Your mother couldn't see it my way, Jimmy, but to me it was peaches and cream to sting Henry Beegoode, who is trying to sting us, and whom we are going to prove tomorrow to be a crook. Maybe there's something wrong in me, I don't dispute it, but it certainly did seem sweet to break off a quarter of a million

of Beegoode money! You see, if there were any crooks in the deal it wasn't to be you kids, it was to be Blackie and me. But, of course, since you know it, that gaudy little futurist splash is off, it's cold, it's plain drab!" Suddenly Wallingford stopped talking, struck into silence by the peculiar expression on his son's face. The rich pink color was again in his oval cheeks, and his quiet quizzical smile was on his lips, and his eyes were narrowed with a shrewdness which was appalling in one so young, while they sparkled with musing enjoyment.

"You're a better man than I am Dunga Din," commented the son of Get-Rich-Quick Wallingford, and rising with the same leisurely movement which his father so well remembered from the time when he had engineered the appropriation of the yellow car, Jimmy reached for his hat and went out of the door, followed by Toad.

J. Rufus and Fannie looked at each other with a new fear in their eyes, then Fannie in a panic started to follow her son, but J. Rufus touched her arm and held her.

"It's up to Jimmy now," he said.

CHAPTER XVIII

THE MISTRESS OF THE SITUATION

THERE was a strange exaltation in Jimmy as he paused outside the private entrance to Henry Beegoode's office. All the way across from the hotel he had not said a word to the stolid figure which plodded by his side, but he had strolled along in that graceful gait which seemed leisurely but was unusually swift, with that musing smile on his lips, that sparkling light in his quiet eye. Now, as he put his hand on the doorknob, he paused to listen to the voices within, and turned to Toad.

"You're voting with me?"

"Sure."

There was something very satisfactory about Toad Jessup. It was his positiveness; and there was a queer silence in Toad, too, just now, a sort of sullen doggedness which pursed out his lips and brought the corners of his jawbone into prominence, and seemed to glow dully in every freckle. Even Jimmy, who knew him so well, speculated an instant on this unusual attitude of his adopted brother, then dismissed the wonder for future speculation for he had what he wanted, and the business at hand was of more importance.

A strange exaltation in Jimmy as he opened the door and paused on the threshold, beholding there a full meeting of the stockholders of The Big Hope Oil Company, besides Henry and Bertram Beegoode and Ebeneezer Terwixter. He held all these people in the hollow of his

hand, he was their superior in advantage, on his action depended their fortunes. The exaltation in him rose to a degree of savage fierceness as he rested his gaze on the Beegoodes, extra vulture-like today with their own exaltation of greed. Involuntarily the tiger in Jimmy made him lick his lips, while between those lips there came a breath short, sharp, hot. The Big Hope well which Bert's father would buy for a quarter of a million dollars was worthless! The Curtis farm was worthless! The Beegoode claim on New Bagdad was worthless, and Bert's father would have to pay back out of his own funds the money he had taken on those lots! Jimmy would just about break Bert's father; break the whole Beegoode family! He! *He* could break them! By gad, he held the power to do it, and the savage in him sang, it leaped, it rejoiced, and it surged the hot blood in his temples and in his ears! To break and discredit and dishonor the whole Beegoode family; crooks! They *were* crooks! Doc Beegoode there, leaning over the back of Mary's chair and smirking down at her! A grinding passion took possession of Jimmy's heart as he watched him. It would be fine to break him, and to expose him as a crook, and then, to finish the job, there was something coming off tonight which would put Doc out of the running for good with Mary! Jimmy scarcely looked at her. There was no space in him for any gentle emotion. What of the beast of prey there was in him, derived from his father, was rampant! It was a conqueror, and a ruthless one, who strode into that room, master of the fortunes of them all, knowing what he knew!

"Well, well, I'll declare boys, you're late," hailed Talbot Curtis, smiling fondly at Jimmy and Toad. He had always liked these boys, and it was fine to have them proved

right! Also he could crow over Mother Curtis; not that he would, of course; but he could. "We wouldn't discuss a thing until you boys came."

A haughtily gracious nod from Ma Curtis, an affectionate smile from Grandma Curtis. Jimmy didn't see Mary, plainly. He was aware that she was extremely pleasant to Toad, who went over and sat by her, taking Doc's chair it seemed; but he kept it. There was a seat at the end of the long table, facing Henry Beegoode at the other end, and this seat had been tacitly reserved for Jimmy; as tacitly he took it, still with that quizzical smile on his lips, that sparkle in his quiet eye. Tal Curtis sat at his left hand, Grandma at his right, and Tal showed him a folded document, sort of privately and confidentially.

"It's a record of mortgage payments," he said sotto-voce, and laughed happily. "As soon as we fix this deal I'm going to clean up that mortgage Henry Beegoode holds on my house, and I won't owe a cent in the world, not a damn cent."

"Good work," smiled Jimmy. There wasn't a muscle in him which was not under perfect command, not an emotion which was not under complete subjection, for into him had come the thrill which makes a crook a crook, the thrill of the game! Power! That was the secret of it! To have any sort of power is the most insidious of all passions! That a woman may conquer a strong man and subject to her will one who can be subjugated by no one else in the world, that is power; to write a great musical composition which shall sway audiences all over the world, and for ages to come, play upon the emotions of mankind, that is power; to form and gain control of a commercial monopoly, to induce millions of people to elect one to the

highest office within their gift, to be the belle of a social gathering or community and distract the attention of every eligible man from the other girls, to foment a rebellion, to incite a world war, to destroy a city, to corrupt the morals of all mankind, or to lead them onward and upward in a great renaissance of religious fervor, all these things are but accomplishments of that mightiest of all cravings in the human breast, the desire for power; and here sat young Jimmy Wallingford, able to enrich his friends, and himself, and to destroy his enemy!

"Well, Mr. Beegoode, we might as well establish our figure and be through with the business. Our price is a quarter of a million dollars."

You could feel the thrill of that sum all around the table. Everybody had a trace of the tang of it, especially Henry.

"That price was never mentioned!" he shrilled, and every wrinkle in his vulture like face was a wrinkle of pain.

"If you please, Mr. Beegoode," returned Jimmy calmly, "let us not haggle. Take all the time you want to make up your mind whether to pay it or not, but that is our price."

"Take it or leave it, Henry, take it or leave it!" added Tal Curtis cheerfully. "You'll find us all of one mind with our friend Jimmy, and if you don't want it at a quarter of a million, we'll keep the property and the oil well."

Henry Beegoode looked around at the stockholders, and he was a man who recognized an ultimatum when he saw one. Truly they were all of one mind with Jimmy, even to his son's fiancee so far as concerned this commercial detail.

"Well, I might go as far as two hundred and twenty-five thousand," he admitted, by way of doing his duty to himself.

The only reply to that was Jimmy's glance at his watch as a reminder that Henry might take his time, and the sight of that, combined with the silent unanimity of the stockholders, so irritated Henry Beegoode that, starting to poke his lead pencil behind his ear he stuck it in his eye, then slammed it on the floor in an excess of helpless rage. He dug Ebeneezer Terwixter viciously in the ribs with his sharp elbow.

"Fill in their amount!" he ordered. "And we'll raise our prices on the allotments out there to cover it."

Jimmy's smile did not change, but he licked his lips again.

"We shall require six certified checks in payment," he stated. "Twenty-five per cent each to Mr. Jessup and myself, twenty-four per cent to Talbot Curtis, twenty-four per cent to Emily Curtis, one per cent to Mary Curtis, one per cent to Lucy Curtis," and Grandma laughed softy as he named her name. "We have here the deed to the Curtis farm, but since it has already been recorded in the name of The Big Hope Oil Company, and you are purchasing the total stock of that concern, there needs to be no further transfer. The assignment of our stock to your name in exchange for your checks will complete the sale, I believe."

"Yes, we've looked into the records," assented Terwixter, rubbing his rib as he watched Secretary Jimmy gather up the stock certificates for transfer.

Young Wallingford took his fountain pen from his pocket to affix his signature to the transfer space on the uppermost certificate, and it was his own, as it happened,

the stock of the natural leader and commander of his company; and he drew his breath in deeply. This was the moment in which he was to exercise that power he had gained, to enrich himself and his friends, and to break his enemies; and all by a trick of such superior shrewdness as to elate him with a sense of mastery over the more stupid minds of these also, shrewd and tricky enemies. Triumph! What a glow of triumph! Cut off their heads! Let the blood flow in streams! So perish all enemies of the victor! He smiled as he removed the cap of his fountain pen to the other end. After all, he'd have to give credit for most of this victory to his highly astute father, of whom he was not an unworthy follower; and suddenly he paused. The paper before him blurred. There came a blackness, as it were, before his eyes, as he was removed far from the scene, removed into vacancy, into space by himself, to confront his own soul. There was no mighty struggle within him, there was no profound self analysis, there was no torrent of emotion. It was only that his fingers, with the fountain pen between them, stopped as if automatically and made no move to write. There is in every man a certain percentage of goodness and a certain percentage of badness, and when the crucial moment comes, *the* crucial moment, it is the greater percentage which wins. Through the veins of Jimmy Wallingford there coursed a certain amount of blood, and through his brain a certain amount of thought, and through his heart a certain amount of impulse, all of which were shrewd, tricky, dishonest; and through veins and mind and heart there was a certain other percentage which came from a source which was all honest, all pure, all clean; and as a crystal dropped into murky water clears it from the top downward, so, just as

quietly and just as magically, that which was clear and pure and clean in Jimmy Wallingford rose to the surface, and settled the sediment down, far down. The blur which had seemed to come on the paper before him, a misty blur, cleared, and out of it a countenance formed, a countenance serene, smiling tenderly with moist eyes — Jimmy's mother! The blur on the paper? It was in his own eyes. He blinked it away as he laid down his pen, aware that they were all looking at him, waiting breathlessly for that first signature which would begin the consummation of the deal, wondering why he hesitated.

"I have decided not to accept the proposition."

A blank silence, out of which suddenly screamed the shrill voice of Henry Beegoode:

"I won't pay another cent!"

"I have decided not to accept any proposition," said Jimmy quietly, and now he moistened his lips; he did not lick them. It had come upon him that he was relinquishing his revenge, foregoing the savage delight of breaking his enemies, of enriching himself and his friends, and that he was doing it against his will, sheerly because of the percentage of honor that was in him! An intrusive thing, this percentage of honor, which, like a percentage of conscience, sometimes seems an impertinent intrusion on the things we most want to do.

"Why not?" It was a harsh voice, a strangely harsh voice which now rose so insistently. It was Ma Curtis, and whatever pretense or pose that woman had affected was gone. She was intensely in earnest.

"I cannot explain, Mrs. Curtis," returned Jimmy, gathering his strength for the contest which was clearly in the determined eye of Mary's mother.

"Then, if you have no reasonable explanation, I must insist that we accept Mr. Beegoode's offer."

"Well, well, Emily. Let's wait a little and consider it," suggested Talbot, panic stricken at the thought of unpleasantness.

"No, Tal." She was not unkind to him, even though she was full of bitterness. "This is my chance, and I'm going to have it. All my life I've skimped and scraped to keep up a genteel appearance on nothing, and while I was skimping and scraping and saving you've let one piece of property after the other slip through your fingers through being so easy. I don't mean to be hard, but I am hard. I want this money! I don't want to take any more chances, and I want the money in my own name, all of it, Tal, yours and mine both!"

It came upon Jimmy that he was going far to make his conscience serve for the consciences of all these others, but he saw very clearly now that what is right is right, and that the way of righteousness is often a thankless way, to be followed for its own sake, and for no expectance of thanks whatsoever. Jimmy looked at Toad. He found in that young man an indifference which he could not comprehend; Toad's lips were still squared and his eyes sullen and his freckles dully glowing with that intensity of stolidity which had settled on him like a mantle; but in answer to Jimmy's unspoken question, Toad gave a jerk of a nod. As swiftly Jimmy glanced at the other stockholders. A vote would be a deadlock. The Curtis family would ballot solidly with Mrs. Curtis. He could read that in Tal's lowered eyes and his lax figure. Mary, of course, with her one share given her by her father and her mother, and Grandma, would complete the fifty-

fifty straddle. Well, that would achieve the result, even if he put it to a vote. So long as they were at a deadlock on this offer, the offer could not be accepted; but while Jimmy was reaching this conclusion, Henry Beegoode suddenly leaned forward, all beak and talons.

"Tell you what I'll do. I'll buy the Curtis stock! It's fifty per cent of the total company, and a hundred and twenty-five thousand dollars is ready!"

There was some good blood Jimmy had from his father, some good wit from his brain, some good pluck from his heart, and all these qualities had another good quality, from his father; they worked instantaneously! Turning he found the bright eyes of Grandma Curtis fixed on him in wonder, and in faith; and in that instant he knew what to do. He made an imperceptible sign to Grandma, and she understood as if it were youth speaking to youth; so when he rose abruptly and walked to the door, Grandma was after him and with him before any one knew what was happening.

"Mother!" shrilled Ma Curtis, quicker than any of them. "Come back here! Where are you going?"

But Jimmy had deftly slipped the key from the lock, caught Grandma by the arm, pushed her through ahead of him, locked the door from the outside and let them pound on it.

"What is it, Jimmy?" asked Grandma, all aquiver with excitement.

He took both her hands in his and looked down into her bright old eyes.

"Grandma, can you keep a secret?"

"Lord bless you, my boy, I'm seventy-four years old, and I know so many things that nobody else has ever

found out that sometimes I just sit by myself and laugh about it."

Jimmy smiled, then turned very grave.

"Suppose I were to tell you that there is no more oil in that well?"

"Oh, you don't say!" and her face fell. "Isn't there, Jimmy?"

"Not a drop. There wasn't any in the first place, but I am not permitted to explain by what accident some came there."

"My, my!" considered Grandma, and shook her head. "My, my!"

"So the question is just this. Knowing that the thing is a cheat, and dishonest, would you want to sell your stock — to any one?"

"No, no! Oh my, no!"

"That's just the case," said Jimmy, and now there was sadness in the gaze he bent down at Grandma. "I can't tell you how sorry I am!" and he choked on it.

"Oh tut tut, don't worry," she returned brightly. "We've always lived, and we always will. And I'm so happy about you, Jimmy, that I don't mind about anything else. They've been saying that you weren't honest, but they'd better not say it to me any more!" She reached up her two old hands and clasped him by the head, and drew him down and kissed him tremulously with a kiss that was as soft as rose petals in the warm sun. "Now let me in, Jimmy. Quick. I'll keep your secret, never fear. But I want to settle this."

The door was pulled violently open as Jimmy unlocked it, and Talbot and Ma Curtis, Doc Beegoode and Henry and Ebeneezer Terwixter were there and surrounding the

conspirators and demanding the meaning of all this; but out of the meleé came the voice of the mistress of the situation, quavering but clear.

"I'm voting my stock with Jimmy!" and she ran over to her place at the table as if that were the spot to make her declaration official.

"I'll have the law inquire into what sort of subordination you've used on this old woman!" rasped Henry Beegoode.

"Old woman!" cried Grandma Curtis. "Old woman! I'm not so old but what you wanted to marry me when I was young, Henry Beegoode! And you wanted to marry me again when your wife died and I was a widow, Henry Beegoode! And I wouldn't have you if you were the last man on earth, Henry Beegoode! And when I die I'll be clutching this one share of stock in my fingers, Henry Beegoode!"

The leadership of Ma, in the Curtis family, was a thing for three hundred and sixty-four days in the year, as the family well knew, including Ma. The three hundred and sixty-fifth day belonged to Grandma, and this was it. Once Grandma had made up her definite mind to anything, there was no power on earth or in the surrounding ether which could change her.

"Well, you see how it is, Mr. Beegoode," said Ma. "The rest of us will sell you our stock."

"Forty-nine per cent!" shouted Henry. "Not by a doggone sight! With fifty-one per cent in the control of this smart young swindler?"

"That's enough of that!" blurted Toad, rising in his chair and shaking a warning finger at Henry Beegoode. A hand was on Toad's shoulder instantly; Doc Beegoode's. Almost as instantly a hand was on Doc Beegoode's

shoulder. It was Jimmy Wallingford's hand, and Jimmy mashed Doc back against the wall with a thud. Here at least he need have no restraint of impulse, although the presence of three ladies put restraint on his action. All he did was to shove his face in front of Doc's, and let Doc quail at the passionate rage which blazed in his eyes, which curled his lip, which distended his nostrils, and which set the muscles of his jaw into knots; then he turned on his heel and walked out, followed by the stolid Toad.

CHAPTER XIX

FAKE, EH?

THE shades of night were falling fast when across the sands of New Bagdad there trod two weary travellers, and one weaved in a graceful rolling grapevine pattern, and one weaved in sharp-pointed zigzags; and their foot paths were like their characters, for the one who curved was Onion Jones and the one who zigzagged was Petrograd Pete; and the twain were in pursuance of the fell purposes of that terrible organization known as the Cataclysm! Furtively and secretively, though none were abroad on the sands of New Bagdad to see, the Cataclysm approached the dark, deserted derrick house of the Wallingford-Daw Oil Aerating Company, and furtively and secretively the Cataclysm passed three times around the tall structure without being able to locate the door.

"Tell you what I shink," said Onion Jones thickly, sitting on the doorstep to rest. "I shink Jim an' Blackie took away the door. S'like 'em. They're shoo shmart for us."

Petrograd Pete sleuthed that idea through all the ramifications of his intellect until he caught up with it, and mastered it, and decided on strategy. First he took a drink of vodka, and handed the bottle to Onion, who promptly strangled and had to be pounded on the back as a matter of custom; then they rose from the doorstep and went in opposite directions, in search of the fugitive door, furtively, cautiously. Ah! Spies! Each member of

the Cataclysm detected the presence of a spy around the far corner of the big dim structure, and each backed away cat-like, from corner to corner, until at the doorstep they bumped from behind. Petrograd Pete was on Onion Jones in an instant, and had him by the throat and was hissing: "Spy!"

"S'lie!" gurgled Onion. "Lemme go! Lemme go, Pete! S'me! Jones!"

"Well, wadjoo doin' spyin?'" demanded Pete, letting go of the throat with reluctance.

"I dunno," responded Onion, much confused. "Smistake here some place. Le's sit down on the doorstep an' talk it over."

Excellent suggestion, for they were tired. They sat on the doorstep and took a drink of vodka, and this time Onion's strangle trailed off into a laugh which seemed to have no end, until Pete rose up and kicked him into silence and got the explanation.

"'S a joke!" gasped Onion. "Looky here Pete. If we're sittin' on the doorstep, the door mus' be right behine us! Lookit an' seefif 't 'aint."

It was the door! The Cataclysm promptly booted it open. strode in and struck match after match in the effort to locate a certain important paper which should give the upper hand to the under-dog, since it would be sorely needed at tomorrow's trial; but without avail, for no match could last long enough for them to look at more than the match. They found a hanging lantern, however, with the aid of Onion's head, but the lantern was a worthless thing, for there was no oil in it! Here they were, practically surrounded by oil, thousands of gallons of it; it was in pipes right beneath their feet, it was stored in giant tanks

just outside; and yet there was no way for them to get enough of it to fill a lantern. But genius knows no obstacles. Pete stumbled out into the darkness, lantern in hand, and drawing a forty-eight calibre pistol from his pocket took wavering aim at the huge dark tank which towered in front of him, and fired. Immediately a solid bar of oil shot out. Beginning at the hole in the tank, Pete struggled with that steel hard rod of rushing oil until it forced him and what it had left of his lantern back to where it was tearing into the sand; and here he lit his dripping wick, just as his companion under-dog staggered out of the derrick house with a paper in his hand.

"Betchoo sisissit!" boasted Onion. "Foun' it wishout match, down behine the pipes where I shaw you drop it. Hadn't move a inch!"

Pete held up his lantern, it was a flaming torch by now, and through his bleary eyes he looked at the paper. The color and the pattern were unmistakable. This was what would give the upper hand to the under-dogs! As he looked, the burning oil ran down the side of the lantern, and the blaze spread hot on his oily hand. It occurred to him that he had no further use for the lantern, so he dropped it — then across the dark sands of New Bagdad weaved the Cataclysm, part of it like a grapevine and part of it in sharp zigzags, leaving behind it that little tongue of leaping flame on the ground, and some thousands of tons of well aerated oil shooting at it through a forty-eight calibre hole!

It was a thing of impish life, that tiny tongue of flame as it hid in the hollow of the sand until it could gather strength for the mighty job of diabolism it had happily to do that night. It flickered and it flared, and it died

down with the passing breeze, and it leaped up again to mock the next zephyr, and it sent out wavering phantasms of blue flame, almost invisible, to circle over the surface of the oil then come back and say that the moment was not yet. Sometimes it seemed to be gone entirely, but always, and steadily, it crept upward on the oil-soaked sand of the little hollow, and spread its circumference, and held tenaciously to the elfin life that was in it, and winked up at the winking stars in that great empty canopy of night which hung over it; for except the stars there were no eyes which saw the flame as yet, not even the nearest pair, which belonged to Jimmy Wallingford out there in a little wooden row boat, all by himself, at the lonely edge of the lake near the dam.

He had slipped out here right after dinner to be alone, because the presence of anybody just now hurt. He had won a big victory that afternoon, perhaps the biggest victory a man can win, and the victory had brought him face to face with defeat! If he was to live by that honesty which he had found in himself, and of which he was now sure for the balance of his life, he must give up everything for which he had striven in this town, and that meant, first, last, and all the way through, Mary! It is small wonder that the perspiration stood out on his forehead though he was not rowing, for little Mary Curtis had taken complete possession of every fibre of him. He loved her! He seemed to be unable to go further than that point, and sat there against the wall of the dam, listening to the trickle of the water through the sluice gates below as intently as if he had come out especially to hear that sound; but when he roused himself his lips were firm, and his eyes clear. He knew what he must do. He must lay aside any

effort to save his business plans, return Tal's land to him, leave the town, and try to forget that there had ever been a Mary Curtis; acknowledge himself licked; and that thought went hard with Jimmy Wallingford, for he had never said the words before, even to himself. But it had to be done, and something else went with it which made it doubly hard. He had to save Doc Beegoode! Jimmy wanted to be just, would be, but it was might difficult for him to be just to Bert. Here were the facts, however; in the attempt to win Mary, Jimmy had used extraordinary temptations to bring out the worst in Doc, as his father had done with Doc's father. Both Beegoodes had lived correctly, so far as anybody knew, in spite of their inward tendencies; and no matter what motive keeps a man straight, the fact that he is straight should be sufficient! It took all of Jimmy's strength, and he had developed a lot of it that afternoon, to say that he *would* save Dr. Bertram Beegoode, and, after a good scare, set his feet again in the straight and narrow path; but the boy accomplished it, and having once made up his mind he couldn't get back across that lake quickly enough, to stop Florodora! He grabbed his oars, and headed home just as the imp-like flame up there in the hollow of the sand began to run dancing circles around the edge of its pit and try its muscles, and its appetite for the steady, hissing stream of oil.

A pretty town, Fawnlake City, and it cut deeply that Jimmy had to leave it — and everything precious which it contained. They were switching on the lights in the bandstand now; this was concert night, and the glimmering lights in the park, and the boulevard lights up Main Street, and all the twinkling lights amid the trees where the town

spread across the hill made it like a fairyland; and it saddens one to be leaving a fairyland — where precious things abide. Oh Jimmy Wallingford, Jimmy Wallingford! In your desire to be honest, you have been more generous than just. Because you yourself felt the pull of a mighty temptation today, you have extended your leniency to a man who couldn't resist, and who wouldn't resist in the years to come; and who never would have been a fit husband for little Mary Curtis!

Perhaps sadness strengthens one, but it didn't strengthen Jimmy as he crossed the park and saw a slender little figure in a flowered organdie standing in front of the Hotel Splendide drug store. Mary, and she was with the family, but when they went in for the ice cream soda which everybody took either before or after the concert, Mary did not go with them; instead she came straight in his direction! He met her just at the entrance to the lilac path, and when he spoke to her she looked up startled, for she had been walking pensively, and as totally alone in her thoughts as Jimmy had been on the lake. For an instant she half turned, as if she would walk away from him without speaking, then she faced him and stood coldly, waiting to hear what he had to say; stood coldly enough, but she trembled, too.

"I'm going away, Mary. Won't you say good-bye to me, and forgive me?"

She controlled the trembling in her voice, angry that it was there.

"I can't."

"I'm sorry, Mary," he went on humbly; though he stood straight and tall and with something of dignity in him, for he felt he was clean of soul. "I have been wrong,

but I'll undo all I can before I go away. Any — any foolish thing Doc may have done is my fault, and I want you to be happy with him!" There was such a curious catch in his voice, and there was such anguish beneath it, that she looked up quickly; and then his repression broke. "I made all my mistakes because I loved you! I do love you, Mary! I — "

She held out a slim white hand, and it did not tremble.

"Good-bye, Jimmy. I forgive you."

He took her hand numbly, and held it a long time while she thought he was going to say something more, but he did not. He was forbidden to say the only thing which would come upon his tongue. He held her hand, because when she took it away it would be "good-bye"! She was going out of his life, and that was like death! He looked at her, as if the dumb pleading in his eyes could move her, but she protected herself against that plea by lowering her own gaze, and he turned abruptly away, staring out across the lake; and in all his shrewdness and keenness of mind he could find no adroitness with which to make a breath in the icy barrier she had set between them. On this item he was dumb, dull, a sluggard. Suddenly he let go of her hand. He was staring at a tiny flame across there, a flame which leaped and wavered and died down and sprang up intensified with each upward leap; and the flame, each time it mounted, showed in dull orange silhouette against the dark sky his father's and Blackie's tall derrick house, and the long row of tanks. Why, the flame was right at the base of them!

"Look!" He grasped Mary's arm. "There's a fire!"

"Fire! There are thousands of gallons of oil over there!"

They ran down towards the lake, and on the beach,

clear of the trees, they could see what appeared to be a sheet of flame suddenly stretch to the nearest tank and play about its surface.

"I'm going across," Jimmy decided, starting to his boat. "I'll leave you to give the alarm if you will."

"Certainly," she readily agreed, and was turning to run through the park when Jimmy called to her and she came back.

"Mary, tonight Bert is to be trapped into a situation which would make him impossible for you. Won't you please telephone Eddie right away, at the Splendide, that I said it's off! I'm rotten sorry for all this. Good-bye."

She stood so motionlessly, and was so shocked and horrified by what he had revealed, that he felt it futile to ask her forgiveness for this last enormity, felt that he well deserved her scorn and contempt, and with a gulp in his throat he jumped into the boat and struck across for the other bank.

Mary remained there, as Jimmy saw with surprise while he rowed away from her; stood and stared after that receding figure on the water, and the wavelets were already orange-tipped from the glow of the far-off flames. Once she turned to go but as she did so there was no need, for the bells clanged out, and people came running down to the beach. They were excited, these people who came running, and they were talking of the danger. She hadn't thought of that. Her mind had been too fully occupied with the complexity of other things, and all these set against the fascination of those leaping flames over yonder. How rapidly they increased; how high they mounted!

From the third floor windows of the Hotel Splendide J. Rufus and Fannie, their arms about each other in a new tenderness since their son had met his great test and come out of it victorious, saw with horror those menacing flames and recognized that stalwart oarsman in the dinner coat who was now half way across the lake! From the windows of the turkey-red parlor, Blackie and Violet and Toad and the lollypops, all but Florodora who was at her rendez-vous and waiting for her fiance, saw, too, that frightening spectacle on the lake, and all of them rushed down and out of the Hotel Splendide, while the Curtises joined the stream of people who poured out of the mouth of Main Street.

The crowd on the beach increased to a throng, and the fire department was already half way around the head of the lake. All about Mary excited voices were gabbling. There were thousands of gallons of oil in those tanks! If the tanks should burst, and that burning oil spread out on the water —

Even while they were talking of it, a great gush of flame shot up, and spread, and then, with a mighty crash that reverberated through the hills back of the town like the roll of thunder, the tank came down and the flames spread like a sea, splashing and eddying in great waves, and a solid wall of fire swept down across the sands; and some one was screaming, screaming in an agony of terror; it was Mary! Near the other bank, a sharply silhouetted black speck against that curtain of orange flame, was Jimmy in the row boat.

"What's it to you?" demanded a harsh voice in Mary's ear. Lanks, and her face was convulsed with fierce emotion. "*I* love him! I'd lay down my life for him!

I'd go to hell for him! And you, you white-faced prude — *what's it to you!*"

For an instant Mary turned on her, and even Lanks in her fury was surprised to see the answering blaze in Mary's eyes. At the same instant a roar of horror went up from the crowd as it saw the smoke roll down the bank and spread on the surface of the water, and with lightning-like rapidity overtake Jimmy's slow-moving rowboat and blot it from view — while through the smoke the red flames glared, and leaping tongues of it had already reached the water's edge. Perhaps he might keep ahead of those flames, might even make his way through them, if the smoke did not suffocate him, but if the other tanks broke loose —

Without a word to Lanks Mary suddenly ran down to the motor boat concealed beneath the boat house bridge, sprang into it, cast off the tiller, and headed out into the lake. No longer in Mary's mind was there any complexity of thought, warring elements, tangled psychology or storm-tossed emotions. She only knew one thing; that Jimmy was out there! Swiftly the rolling smoke obscured her, too. Before Mary had more than disappeared into that awesome curtain, the advance of the burning oil had reached the beach at the Park, little running blue spirits of disappearing flame, and suddenly Fawnlake City became aware of not merely a great spectacle and a great waste, and perhaps a great tragedy, but that a great peril menaced the town! If the other tanks should burst and flood the lake, and the wind sweep those high leaping flames ahead of it, Fawnlake City was doomed, the whole town, when once the houses down near the water's edge should catch on fire!

Those little blue spirits of disappearing flame, running fingers of fire which darted hither and thither like a net work of ghosts of lightning flashes, were everywhere on the water beneath the curtain of rolling smoke, where Jimmy, with a wet handkerchief bound around his mouth and nostrils, rowed painfully in the red-brown gloom, setting his mind upon keeping the pull of his arms even so that he should not go in circles; for in that impenetrable pall he had no sense of direction. That dull glow confronted him on every hand, and the stifling smoke smarted in his eyes and burned in his lungs, and something rang in his ears, buzzed in his head, and he was fighting off his second paroxysm of faintness when suddenly, near at hand, he heard a sound which gave him new life, new strength. His name was called — and in Her voice!

"Jimmy!"

"Mary!"

"Jimmy!"

"Mary!"

"Jimmy!"

It was magical, the thrill in those groping calls through the obscurity which baffled direction. Backward and forward came the names, until suddenly a mighty explosion rent the air, and flames reached far up into the sky. A second tank had burst! A cross shift of the wind lifted the curtain of smoke for a moment and showed to the watchers on the beach the two boats out there, with Mary stretched limply along the gunwale but still clutching the wheel, and Jimmy not far away, bending forward at his oars and peering through the smoke; and a circle of flames surrounded him, where the oil clung near his wooden hull. Then the wind died and the curtain fell

again, and frantically Jimmy rowed toward where he had seen her boat; but when he had gone twice the distance that he should he realized that he had missed her, and stopped his oars to call and call again. No answer! Some place there in the muffling vapors, evasive, mocking, there was the slow chug of a motor, but beside that there was only the silence of death around him, and those orange glowing masses of sweeping smoke, and the darting pattern of flame fingers on the surface of the water, and here and there tiny floating pools of iridescent oil streaked with the dulled colors of every tint in the rainbow; and now a steadily growing heat which began to be intolerable, to stifle, to suffocate, to burn and parch the skin, to sear the eyeballs, to scorch the lungs. Gasping and choking, Jimmy picked up his oars again and steered blindly into that impenetrable curtain which was like the veil of death — and now the flames from the second tank came sweeping down the sand and began to spread upon the water!

They were frantic back on the beach; women were screaming and men were cursing, but there was no help for those in the lake, no way to reach them, for clumsy hands in their excitement had let the boat barge loose, and it had drifted out amid the smoke. Toad Jessup would not say there was no chance! He found a lane in the smoke, where the breeze blew down from the Big Hope ravine and across the water like a blast from a blow pipe, and, throwing off his shoes and his coat, he plunged in; and with parted lips and suspended breath Cleo watched the swimmer disappear down that dim perspective, while past her tore a score of men headed for the dam.

The sluice gates! Out of the paralysis which had seized them all had come this sudden thought; the only thing

which could save the town was to raise the sluice gates wide, and empty the water out of the dam and let the burning oil collect in the center of the lake where it could burn itself out in the wet sand. It was but the work of a moment to throw open the doors of the sluice house and pull the levers. Already the mighty flood was beginning to pour out down there when Wallingford and Blackie and Tal Curtis came like mad-men and tried to force their way in; shrieking to close the gates, to close the gates, that they were dooming Mary and Jimmy to a positive and a horrible death in that burning oil! Cold eyes met that appeal, for it was the safety of the town and the lives of perhaps thousands, as opposed to the lives of two! There was a struggle at the sluice house door, Blackie fighting like a demon, and Tal Curtis, his white curls waving and his infantile face set in desperate pallor, battling as his sires had battled in wars of old, and even J. Rufus, who had always shrank from physical combat, was charging like a wild bull — for Jimmy was out there, his Jimmy, his son! But it was three men against a mob, and in the midst of the unequal fight there came a deafening explosion and a column of flame leaped up into the air; and as if that terrific sound had cleared something in his brain, J. Rufus stopped his fighting and found a way to save Jimmy — at his own expense! He sprang on the platform and shouted:

"The danger's over, men! The danger's over! There's no more oil!"

Gigantic Bill Henderson, against whose stupendous frame of bone and muscle Wallingford had vainly battled, looked up at him and howled:

"There's nine more tanks! The flames come higher with

every explosion! The next one or the next after that will sweep right over the town! Get down from there!"

"Let him alone or I'll brain you!" snarled Blackie, thrusting himself between Henderson and J. Rufus; and in his hand he held a convenient length of gas pipe. "Go to it, Jim! Tell 'em its a fake!"

"It's a fake!" yelled Wallingford. "Look at that wreath of smoke in the sky! That's a gas explosion! There wasn't a drop of oil in that tank!" Another explosion interrupted him. "Watch that one! The whole thing's a fake, I tell you! It's a fake! The only two tanks that had oil are already burst! See; the flames aren't any higher!"

They were not any higher, they were lower instead; as the oil spread on the sand and on the water the height of the fire was less, and the two new explosions had brought no fresh floods of oil. They could all see that, and they hesitated. In that instant of hesitation Blackie and Tal pushed past the guards at the door, and seizing the levers frantically closed the sluice gates.

With the stoppage of the roar of the water there seemed to come a calmer mood on the crowd, which was increased now by the throngs from the beach who had moved down to this new scene of excitement. In that calmness, the mob of investors in New Bagdad oil land turned slowly from the seething inferno out there, and, recovering from its panic, gazed on big J. Rufus Wallingford up on the platform, and remembered what he had said. Fake, eh?

CHAPTER XX

THE FOUNTAIN OF RUBIES

WHAT did he mean by "fake"? Ten tanks had been built over there! The gauges showed nine of them to be full, the tenth filling! Everybody in town knew the state of those gauges! Yet, when the fire came, only two of the tanks had contained oil! The rest had merely contained air impregnated with the fumes of oil! There went another one, now, as harmless as a pop gun! J. Rufus had been unconscious of the effect of the confession he had so desperately made to save his son, for he was peering anxiously out into those lurid rolling clouds; but as he turned to read in Blackie's eyes some message of hope or fear for the hidden boy, he was struck by something grim in his partner's attitude. Collar torn and hair touseled from the struggle at the sluice levers, Blackie stood with his arms folded, his iron gas pipe still in his hand; and he was smiling steadily down at the gathering crowd, a snarl beneath the smile. J. Rufus looked at them quickly, and he felt the pasty pallor rising to his cheeks; for he sensed something in that mob of which it was not itself aware; something dangerous!

They had begun to murmur, those investors, and to stir uneasily, and just then there came up out of the crowd a shrill rasping female voice, the voice of a raging virago, with:

"Lynch 'em! Lynch 'em! Lynch 'em!" It was Caroline Beegoode, and her face was demoniac in its intensity of

hatred. She struggled to the edge of the platform where she could glare up her viperous fury at Wallingford and at Daw. Henry was with her, and black rage was in him, too, that his oil land was a "fake"; but he had no chance for speech, for beside him Caroline kept shrieking monotonously: "Lynch 'em! Lynch 'em! Lynch 'em!"

Suddenly the sheriff, a brawny person with a yellow mustache, jumped on the platform. He was scared blue and began to argue for calmness; and he was stirring up the very thing he dreaded. He represented law and order, but he was ranging law and order on the side of swindlers who were destroying law and order, and thereby he made them impatient of law and order; so they howled him down. However, it wasn't a riotous mob as yet, for in spite of that shrill virago voice which kept shrieking its hate, no person had risen among them to lead them on across the border line where men become blind beasts. Wallingford noted that fact, knew it with all the concentrated wisdom of humanity which was in him, knew, too, that at any instant the man of the moment was likely to spring up. In all such cases the man of the moment must spring up, and suddenly he did. It was J. Rufus Wallingford!

"So you've brought in a verdict, have you?" he jovially inquired, as he pumped the pink into his face and smiled his genial smile and actually accomplished a shoulder-heaving chuckle, though his legs wanted to wobble under him. "Well, I'll hand you a laugh!"

You could feel the change in that crowd as they looked up at the smiling big fellow, and actually waited for the promised laugh; and Fannie Wallingford, down in the crowd, stilled the voice of terror in her as she looked up confidently

at him, while the lean dark-visaged man who stood beside the orator with his handy length of iron pipe in his fist drew a deep breath of relief and grinned, and smoothed his black mustaches to sharp points. He'd have to hand it to Jim, he certainly would! With that section of gas pipe Blackie knew that he could wollop at least a dozen men, but Wallingford's tongue could wollop at least a thousand!

Why Jim was telling them the great joke on Henry Beegoode, who was to be proved a common thief in court tomorrow; telling them with the gusto of a born story teller the rare and rosy jest of the hole-in-the-hill, and the pump, and the shipped oil, and the tremendous comedy inside the derrick when they made the town imagine they'd struck oil so Henry Beegoode would think the land worth stealing; and when Wallingford thrust his hand in his pocket for the paper about which he had told them, that violet tinted third copy of the bill of sale which he had secured from Henry and Doc by such a cute trick, they were with him to a man! They were laughing heartily, and Henry Beegoode, guilty in his soul, and Caroline, equally guilty, made themselves as small as possible in the shadow of the platform, and began to look for chances to get away.

But presently the laugh began to check. The comedy flourish with which the jovial J. Rufus had reached into his pocket for the paper had *not* ended with the production of the paper! It wasn't there! It wasn't in any of his pockets! Why, he'd seen the thing that very morning; had it in his hands!

"Well, where is it?" suddenly shrilled Henry Beegoode, springing on the platform steps, black with craven passion

to have these people murdered before they could find that paper. "He hasn't got it! And he never did have it! It's another fake! It's a desperate lie to save his hide at the expense of an honest man; one of your own townspeople that you've known for years! He's played one dirty trick after another ever since he came into this town! He'd stop at nothing! But this has got to be his last fake! I say lynch 'em!" and immediately there rose again the shrill voice of Caroline Beegoode:

"Lynch 'em! Lynch 'em! Lynch 'em! Lynch 'em!"

Now at last that insistent demand began to stir the blood lust in them, angry as they were that they had been duped again, and in the ominous silence during which their tempers gathered heat, a fight broke out in the edge of the crowd. Two men were rolling over and over in the grass back there at the slope of the hill, and from them came up a hoarse voice calling Jim; Blackie. Fannie and Violet Bonnie both recognized that voice, and frantically they ran back to find Onion Jones and Petrograd Pete in a deadly struggle for the possession of a crumpled paper. It was clutched in Onion's fingers, and Pete, with his teeth sunk in Onion's wrist, was trying desperately to open that hand.

"Take it, quick!" gasped Onion, as Pete strove to smother his voice. "Give it to Jim, and tell 'im Onion always comes through!"

Fannie seized the paper, and in the very instant that she did so there broke forth a sound from around the platform which was blood curdling. Jed Purvit had made a dash up the steps, with other men pushing behind him, and Blackie's iron pipe had come down on his skull! Then had gone up the angry roar. The crowd had reached

the last limit of its patience; and as Bill Henderson sprang forward and shouted for them to "come on," a dozen men, a score, a half a hundred pushed forward with murder in their hearts; and the sheriff and four policemen were all that stood between.

"Jim! Jim! Jim!" Fannie came running with the bill of sale high in her hand.

Too late. They couldn't hear her above all the other tumult of sounds; nor the frantic voice of Violet. There was a battle going on at the foot of the steps, and policemen's clubs were pounding viciously, and the sheriff's face was bleeding and his hat was gone and his coat was torn; and a bedlam was raging there, a hell! Jim heard Fannie's voice above all the tumult, saw her out there, saw the violet-tinted paper in her hand, and with a quickening of his heart he shouted that there it was, there was the proof, there was the paper, the bill of sale! But they might have all been deaf, so far as he was concerned; the magic of his voice was past reliance. It had been used, and it wouldn't work again! Those men had led tranquil, honest lives until now, and had been cozened and bull dozed and cheated and lied to until they were sick of it! They meant business, and the time when those griping hands would be on his flesh could be counted by minutes, almost by seconds! He clutched at his collar. It was choking him. God, this couldn't be true! It wasn't right! It wasn't just! What terrible faces those men had. They weren't human with their glaring eyeballs and their set jaws and those flecks of foam on their lips! It suddenly occurred to Get-Rich-Quick Wallingford, even in that desperate moment, that a man is taking a long chance when he plays with the property rights of others, and he

wished, from the bottom of his heart, that he had never done a crooked thing in his life! Then this tragedy couldn't have come to Fannie, and to Jimmy! That broke him. His muscles went flabby and darkness seemed to fall — and then there was Blackie's fierce clutch on his arm and Blackie's fierce voice in his ear, telling him to buck up and die with his teeth in a throat! Ugh! Just he and Blackie to battle for a few extra minutes of life, just he and Blackie, just he and Blackie! Suddenly there was some one else beside him, some one out of that rolling smoke along the dam; Jimmy! Jimmy, with his face blackened by fire and his shirt front scorched and his hands blistered, but his jaws set with high courage as he ranged alongside his father; *his* father before all the world! And there was Toad alongside Blackie, good, sturdy, freckled Toad with fight in him from the roots of his hair to the tips of his square-toed shoes. Almost Jim Wallingford had been going under, but the sight of Jimmy by his side roused his pride and stiffened his knees. Just in time, for the sheriff gave way and they were coming! Coming! And in all the earth and sky, there wasn't a thing which could save them — these four against all that mob. Before the flames of the oil died down, four ropes would be dangling from that heavy bar which held the sluice gate cables —

"*Jimmy! Look! Jimmy, Jimmy, look!*" Tal Curtis down in the mob with Mary, and his voice was so electrical that even those grim men on the steps heard it, and turned, and looked! There, up the ravine, the Big Hope Oil well was spouting a mighty column, two hundred feet high, a fountain of gleaming rubies in the glare of the fire from New Bagdad, and as the crowd stilled, its attention

distracted by this new wonder, the rush and the roar of that tremendous gushing pillar could be heard above every other sound!

Among all that crowd the first to recover his composure, the first to regain the use of his wits was Get-Rich-Quick Wallingford!

"Look at my son's Big Hope well!" he cried, and the blood was back in his face, the strength in his knees. "It's a gusher! Real oil! Millions of gallons of it!"

"I pumped it!" screeched the vindictive voice of Petrograd Pete, seizing his glorious opportunity.

"It's a lie!" cried Wallingford, and tried to say more but it was in their minds that that gusher was being pumped, and they drowned the voice of the fakir with angry howls. It might have begun all over again, but as that possibility quivered on its tragic verge another voice broke in, a clear and a vibrant and a young voice; Jimmy Wallingford's!

"You'll listen to me, men!" he told them, breasting those grim executioners who still hesitated at the top of the steps. "You'll listen to me, if I die for it! And you'll believe what I tell you!" There was a ring in that voice which Get-Rich-Quick Wallingford had never tried, the ring of an honest man who knew that he was honest, and who was confident that the truth must be believed. J. Rufus drew a deep breath of relief, and he began to gather up a few words with which to help his son; but as he waited for his opportunity it suddenly broke on his knowledge that the boy didn't need any help. He was getting them. No, by George, he had them! As the young oil magnate's vibrating tones rang on, telling them all about it, men's faces softened and women stopped their hysteria. Oh, it

was marvelous! It was magical, the way this mesmeric big young fellow stayed and held these people, and the mountebank father of this wonderful son felt his heart beat high and his eyes grow moist. Jimmy's mother, standing down there in the crowd and realizing that the tragedy was winging past her, looked up at her son with tears on her cheek, herself under the spell of this master wizardry which her son was able to exercise over the hearts of humanity. Her son! Her son — and so like his father; so like; but honest!

Making them see it, was Jimmy, that the violet tinted paper was right and true, that the Beegoodes were what they were, that his father was what he so jovially looked to be; and then, most marvelous of all, making them believe again in spite of their disbelief that opulence was really to be within their grasp; and leading them to lift up their hearts again and hope, and weave once more dreams of wealth and happiness.

"Look at it!" he was telling them. "Look at it! Could any drunken fool say that he could pump that much oil out of the ground with a plain pump and make you believe it? Why, there's a million million tons of oil under this town, and we're all rich! And now I'll tell you something else! This afternoon I *did* think that well up there to be a fake, and because it wouldn't be honest to sell it, I refused a quarter of a million dollars for it!"

"You can prove it by me, Jimmy! You can prove it by me!" quavered the high-pitched voice of Grandma Curtis, and she wiped her eyes as she smiled up at him, from where she leaned on the arm of broad and comfortable looking President Burrowes of the G. and W. and A. I. and E. "Jimmy told it to me, and I voted with

him, because it wasn't honest to sell it — *even to Henry Beegoode!*"

It was good to hear that laugh from the crowd! Splendid! Heart-warming!

"And I'll tell *you* something else, Jimmy!" called up Burrowes. "I'm going to begin shoving that branch road through your oil land next week!"

The new railroad! That was the finishing touch. A new railroad, and genuine oil, and everything! Now indeed was Fawnlake City agog and agape and agag! The golden dreams they had been led to believe were realities, right now! They'd all be rich! And, say, a fellow likes to be just, doesn't he? Well they wouldn't have been rich if it hadn't been for Jimmy Wallingford; so blessed be the name of Wallingford, J. Rufus and all! Also Daw! Also everybody! Except the Beegoodes, on whom anathema! Where was Henry? Why sneaking away across the park! Hey there! Stop him! Stop thief! And every last soul in Fawnlake City who had bought an oil lot from Henry had a sudden feeling that they couldn't trust him with the money over night! So there he went, lickety split, with a third of the town after him, and by his side a gaunt female figure streaking it along in more than panic, for while she was fully dressed from the waist up she was not decorously dressed from the waist down, her skirt having remained in the clutches of Violet Bonnie Daw!

Ah, this was a great night, a fine night, and the two-thirds of the town who stayed behind to watch the heroes gather up there on the platform, the Wallingfords, the Daws, the Curtises, the lollypops and President Burrowes, laughed themselves sick to see those Beegoodes go it, blast them! And while they were laughing at that,

Petrograd Pete advanced on Onion Jones with malicious intent, but Onion, who had turned rabid royalist in the last hour and was happy in his new allegiance to his king, happened to be lighting his pipe at the time, and having his match in his hand he naturally touched it to Pete's oil-soaked whiskers, and the head of the Cataclysm, with one wild shriek, plunged into the lake and was fished out with all his powers for evil gone, for his whiskers were missing! And while everybody was laughing at that, there began a new hilarity in the center of the crowd, which worked rapidly outward. The lollypops were with great gusto tossing out photographs of Dr. Bertram Beegoode in many interesting poses, and the work was being done under the direction of the divine Florodora who explained that she had started to elope with the piker but found he could only command seventy-five thousand dollars, and she renigged; for what could she do in New York with seventy-five thousand dollars and a hick husband! This was the richest laugh of all, and from that laugh, which would last for years in Jimmy Wallingford's town, "Blinkers" Beegoode was speeding away as fast as the little tin coupé would carry him.

Why, the lollypops were throwing rice up there on the platform, and Jimmy Wallingford was kissing little Mary Curtis, and she kissed him back in plain sight of all — for everything had been settled between them out there in the lake, and they were already happy ever after. Hooray! Three cheers for little Mary! And three cheers for Jimmy Wallingford, the boy orator, next Mayor of Fawnlake City, next Senator, next anything. Hooray, hooray! And Toad Jessup was kissing Cleo, and there was more throwing of the rice which had been meant for

Florodora and her swain. Three cheers for Eddy and his willowy bride, hooray, hooray! Music! Up in the bandstand the band, "tipped off" by the triumphant sheriff, who felt that he had done his full duty this night and saved the day, played "Here Comes the Bride".

As with one accord, Jimmy and Toad turned to each other and grinned, then as with one accord they gazed on that majestic spectacle at the head of the ravine, that ruby-tinted gusher of real oil, which, gathering strength since the last tap had opened a way for it through Wallingford's rock pocket, had blown off its own cap, torn away the derrick, and was relieving itself with volcanic violence. With tears in his eyes Jimmy put his arm around his freckled partner, and said:

"Well Toad, what do you think of it now?"

Toad squared his lips:

"What I always thought! What I always kept on thinking, even when you were going to sell out and I didn't give a dang whether you did or not. I always knew there was oil down there! Didn't I, Tal?"

"Certainly did, Toad, certainly did!" yelled Tal, a hand on the shoulder of his friend Wallingford and a hand on the shoulder of his friend Blackie, and his curls were bobbing for he was cutting a caper like a schoolboy. "And I'll have to say this about our son Jimmy, Mr. Wallingford; he's a smart boy, and I'll make mother say so before the night's over!"

"I'll say it now, Tal," agreed Ma, in the pleasantest frame of mind she had been for many a day, and she smiled most amiably on Mrs. Wallingford and Mrs. Daw; and happy Grandma just kept saying "My, my! My, my!"

"But kids!" J. Rufus Wallingford had this night retired

permanently from all business, yet nevertheless his commercial instincts were still with him. "If you fellows can step down from glory for a little while, don't you think you'd better plug that well? You're losing a hundred dollars a minute! Hustle right up there, in Sweet Patootie. She's yours!"

"Thanks, dad," drawled Jimmy, a twinkle in his eye and that quizzical smile on his lips as he drew Mary's arm through his and turned to the steps. "Father, what's your idea about a lobeless ear?"

The whole family waited for that answer, the Wallingfords, the Daws, the Curtises, the lollypops, and "Daddy," this last person being none other than President Burrowes, who had been adopted on the spot by the lollypops, and liked it.

"Well, son," said J. Rufus, looking Jimmy eye to eye with the same twinkle and the same smile, and feeling mighty close to the boy this night; "I'll say that it means about the same as a cowlick, and a cowlick denotes an honest man or not according to who wears it!" and Fannie Wallingford, her arm in her husband's, smiled in serene content. It is good to travel a long journey, and reach a happy ending.

THE END